

## THE RISE AND FALL OF MUMIA

In this chapter, the fortune and fate of Nabongo Mumia are put into clearer focus. The chapter increases our understanding of the political career of Mumia. We shall be in a position to understand the part, or lack of it which Mumia played under the British colonial administration as described in the preceding chapter. An attempt is also made to evaluate the career of Mumia. Nabongo Mumia occupied a special and prominent place in the system of British colonial administration from 1908 to 1926. Archer compared him to the Kabakas of Buganda. He wrote in 1908:

“Mumia is undoubtedly, regarded by the natives as Paramount Chief of the District, His influence extends across the Uganda border and to the people on the slopes of Elgon”.

K.R Dundas, succeeded Archer in April 1909. The district was renamed Elgon. He also held the same views as Archer. He wrote:

“Mumia’s position resembles very, much that of the kings of Uganda, and is distinctly on an altogether different footing to that of the ordinary chief”.

Dundas strongly recommended an official recognition of the title of Paramount Chief to Mumia. Dundas was implied by E.P. Evans in November 1909. Evans recognised Mumia as the Paramount Chief; ‘a “Chief among chiefs” (see photo). His jurisdiction was called Sub-District No. 1. It was still the biggest administration unit. Members of his family were made chiefs in the remaining sub-districts (see local Administration in Elgon District as of May 27, 1909) and Nabongo Mumia’s Colonial jurisdiction of North Kavirondo. The title of Paramount Chief could be removed as local circumstances and British interests dictated. But Mumia was not told this. In fact Mumia was in some cases simply called a “Headman” of North Kavirondo. In the Native Authority Ordinance of 1912, it was gazetted as follows:

“Mumia Shiüнду, Paramount Chief of North Kavirondo District, Nyanza Province, is hereby declared .to be the Official Headman of North Kavirondo ‘District. All sub-chiefs, Headmen and Councils of Elders in the North Kavirondo District are subordinate to him. Nabongo Mumia regarded himself as Paramount Chief because the title sounded more dignified than the Headman. Throughout his tenure as Paramount Chief, Nabongo Mumia regarded himself independent and autonomous. The government policies and appointments of headmen and chiefs were interpreted by most Luhya as coming from Mumia. It was that arrogant pride and dignity that made Nabongo Mumia, a living legend of Abashitsetse Dynasty. Consequently, attempts to abolish the title Paramount Chief, created political instability and consciousness throughout Nyanza.

Nabongo Mumia carried out his duties diligently, loyally and with discretion up to 1914. But some colonial officials did not want the title of Paramount Chief. John Ainsworth, the Chief Native Commissioner, i.e the officer in charge of Native Affairs, wanted Mumia to be retired as Paramount Chief in 1915. The District Commissioner,

E.C. Spencer, supported Ainsworth in his report before ending his tenure in~ January 1916. He wrote:

“Mumia is Paramount Chief of this district but he is old and somewhat feeble and exerts little authority or influence, even in his own location of Wanga. He is treated with respect only because of his position, and of regard for his friendly attitude and alleged good services to the Government in the early trouble-ridden days, but he is of little use to the administration nowadays. He is shrewd, and possesses more independence of character and dignity of manner than is usual in the natives of this country, but, realising probably that his former powers as chief are circumscribed by a civilised administration, he no longer takes the trouble to assert himself. I see no necessity for the office of Paramount Chief in this district, and I believe it would be advisable, on the death of Mumia, that his successor should be merely Chief of the large Wanga location.”

Spencer recommended the retirement of Mumia because of two reasons. First, according to Spencer, Mumia was an old man with little authority or influence. Secondly, Spencer argued that the administration was stable and effective. It is, however, clear that people like Spencer did not like the independence of and respect given to Mumia. The royal background of Mumia, and the big location of Wanga given to him, worried and annoyed colonial administrators. Thus, the position of Mumia caused a dilemma to the colonial officers. It was thought advisable to retain the title Paramount Chief until Mumia's death.

In order to escape the dilemma which they had themselves created, the colonial administrators shifted the centre of power to Mumia's brother, Chitechi. The locations under Mumia's sons Kumaruti and Kong'ani, his cousin Tomia and Chitechi, were merged and given to Chitechi. The relationship between Mumia and the colonial officers deteriorated. The colonial officers called the demand for more power to Mumia or tribalism. In 1919, the boundary between North and Central Kavirondo was demarcated to reduce solidarity for Mumia. The Luo locations of Gem, Ugenya and Alego were changed with the Luhya locations of Maragoli, Tiriki, Bunyore and Kisa. The Luo locations were transferred to Central Kavirondo whereas Luhya ones went to North Kavirondo.

The Abaluhya of Samia did not want Kadima, Mumia's brother. They preferred to remain in Central Kavirondo. The Samia traded with Buholo (Luo) who remained in North Kavirondo. Bunyala also remained in Central Kavirondo. The border changes of 1919 did not solve what was called “the Mumia problem.” In 1925, the chieftainship of Chitechi was given back to Mumia. But it was another tactic to please Mumia. In 1926, Chamier, the District Commissioner, persuaded Mumia to relinquish his chieftainship to his son, Nafukho and to retain that of Paramount Chief.

Chamier was looking for a way to retire Mumia. He retired Mumia as the Paramount Chief. But Mumia was not told. Nafukho was fired and replaced by Osundwa, Chitechi's son. Mumia continued to receive salary of Paramount Chief. He learned of the retirement in 1927. In the year of Mumia's retirement, 1926, the headquarters at Mumias were transferred to Maxsted near Kakamega. The official explanation was that blackwater fever at Mumias killed Europeans. But it is possible that the blackwater fever would have been treated with chemicals. The transfer of the

headquarters was officially calculated to accelerate the fall of Mumia. It destroyed the Wànga pride and power centred at Mumias.

Kakamega is in Isukha near the border with Butso, and so there was no ethnic solidarity in Kakamega. Many chiefs had felt that Mumia was advantaged in having the administrative centre in his own capital. Kakamega became an important centre. In 1913, gold was discovered there. Europeans settled there. A Government school, the only one in the area, and a hospital were built. A golf club was constructed.

Thus, Mumia declined with Mumias. The British officials, however, were haunted by their own game of abandoning Mumia. In 1936, the District Commissioner of North Kavirondo still regarded Mumia as the Paramount Chief. What he wrote throws light on Mumia's position then. He wrote:

“Mumia, the Paramount Chief who is living in retirement, is now a very old man, and thinks more in the past than in the present. It is hard to ascertain what influence he really exerts nowadays. He is intensely jealous of the future of his sons, none of whom appears alas, to resemble the young Mumia in force, ability and statecraft.”

The above quotation is important because it throws light on Mumia's disillusionment with his collaboration with the British. Had he gained anything? We shall come to this question later when we assess Mumia's career. What we know is that Mumia was not revengeful. He continued to assist the British. He assisted them in their war effort during the Second World War. The British only waited for his death, for Mumia was living too long to their expectations or liking.

### **The Death of Mumia**

Mumia lived longest, of all the Wanga kings. One simple reason was that it was natural on his part. However, the style of his livelihood can provide an explanation. Nabongo Mumia was selective and scrupulous in the food he ate. Mumia did not eat grains, chicken, mutton and fish. He ate he-goat meat and green vegetables. The food was cooked by professional cooks from Abekhami clan. Mumia had many wives, but he did not trust them when it came to food. It seems that Mumia was contented with his life and career. When he fell ill, the government officials were worried that trouble might erupt if he died. Mumia was confined at home. He died on April 24th, 1949. Tight security was arranged at Kakamega and Kisumu.

He was buried on April 25th, 1949. Governor. Sir Philip Mitchell regretted the death of Mumia, whom he said, had supported the colonial administration with loyalty and dedication. Mumia's body was removed from his house and put in that of his most beloved wife. A shallow grave was dug in the centre. The body was first wrapped in a white linen cloth and finally in a bull skin. The bull had been killed by his youngest son Shitawa whom Mumia had appointed to succeed him Luta was appointed to assist Shitawa. K. L. Hunter, the Provincial Commissioner, represented.

Governor Sir Philip Mitchell and his government John Ainsworth, the District Commissioner, the Superintendent of Police and high-ranking British officials

attended the burial on April 25th, 1949. A firing squad by police was the honour which the colonial government gave Mumia.

### **Assessment of Mumia's Place in History**

The burial was symbolic. Mumia marked the transition from tradition to modernity. He had been slow to understand changes around him, but he adapted to them. The fact that his body was first wrapped in white linen showed that modern changes had overtaken tradition. Tradition, however, is the umbilical cord to history and that is why a new Nabongo was appointed and crowned according to custom. The fact that Mumia's body was also wrapped in an animal skin shows that tradition and modernity were interdependent.

The East African Standard, April 25, 1949, was the first to give what can be called an objective assessment of Nabongo Mumia. Among others, the following was written:

“Chief Mumia was outstanding in that he and his family were from the first faithful and helpful friends of the British when they first appeared on the caravan route to Uganda which passed his village, since known as Mumias. During his long life-time and amid the tremendous changes which have taken place, Mumia never wavered in his loyalty to the Government of Kenya nor did he fail in his duties to his people. His name has become legendary throughout many of the tribes of Kenya while he was held in peculiar affection by his own particular people, the Bantu tribes of North Nyanza....”

The views expressed in the above quotation are that Nabongo Mumia was a collaborator, a loyal agent in the British administration and a popular leader among the Abaluhya. A.T. Mason rated him as “the greatest of the tribal leaders of East Africa” because he raised the Abaluhya; he made the Abaluhya nationalistic and proud of themselves. John Osogo was also impressed by Nabongo Mumia. He claimed that Mumia “would undoubtedly have been one of the greatest of the traditional Nabongos” if the British had not colonised the area. (footnote 22). He wrote:

“So passed away one of Kenya's greatest sons and leaders. Only posterity will be able to judge and relate the part that Mumia played in Kenya's struggle for self-determination, and the great odds he faced as a traditional monarch overtaken by a colonial age.”

The discussion in his biography shows that, Mumia united neither the Wanga nor Abaluhya. In the context of Wanga history alone, he cannot be counted as a “great” or the “greatest” Nabongo. It was the colonial experience which created Luhya consciousness. Mumia was legendary because during the long life which he lived, he did not show that he was an agent, or a stooge of the British. He upheld the dynastic history of the Wanga.

Mumia can be compared to “Ethereal the Unready.” King Ethereal was not ready to pay tribute to Danish conquerors. The Danish colonialists always forgot to collect the tribute, and when they remembered, and asked King Ethereal, he replied that he was not ready to pay. The Danes called King Ethereal, “weak”. This is one of the

memorable events in British history. It is found in a book called *1066 and All That*. In this book, fun is made about the king. He is called “famous” for two reasons. First, he was a “rebellious” collaborator. Secondly, he was not ready to die. This joke symbolises the reality and myth of Nabongo Mumia.

Nabongo Mumia was a collaborator during the imposition of British rule. He was not ready to abandon his kingship, and he lived longer to the annoyance of the British. Mumia was therefore a rebellious collaborator who became famous to the Abawanga in particular and Abaluhya in general. Mumia’s rebellion and fame constitute the myth.

Collaborators were viewed by colonialist historians as being far-sighted, wise, and modern. The resisters, on the other hand, were called short-sighted, conservative and anti-modern. It was claimed that collaborators gained, whereas the resisters lost during colonialism. Those interpretations have been rejected by African historians.

The roles of the collaborators and resisters have been reversed. It has been concluded that the collaborators and resisters were forerunners of modern nationalism because the role played was to protect or preserve independence, justice and liberty. It is in this context that A.T. Mason and John Osoyo interpreted the collaboration of Nabongo Mumia.

Nabongo Mumia was not a collaborator, neither were the so-called collaborators aware of the results of their actions. He saw his kingdom enjoy security and growth that it had never had before the British came. Abawanga agents gained prominence and power, and certainly, prosperity. It was only Nabongo Mumia who discovered that he was a victim of the British colonial system he had helped to establish. The Wanga Kingdom “ceased to exist as an effective and independent political entity”.

The role of Mumia was paradoxical. In life there seems to be two options (either or) from which to choose. There are usually gains in the short-run and in the long-run, gains may continue or losses may set it. This is the irony of life and human beings cannot pre-determine or predict the results.

Nabongo Mumia was important in two ways. On the positive side, Mumia was a symbol of political consciousness and protest against British colonialism. He was realistic to tell Jomo Kenyatta that it was premature to talk of decolonisation. On the negative side, Mumia did not exploit the colonial contradictions and develop Wanga or North Kavirondo. John Osoyo offered the following explanation. He wrote:

“So traditionalist was he that, he saw every action through the smoke screen of Wanga hierarchical bigotry; so flattered was he that he made the mistake of considering the British as serving his purpose, where the British quite rightly knew he was unwittingly serving theirs.”

Mumia was not a moderniser and the convincing reason seems to be because he didn’t understand the purpose of colonialism. It was education which created an awareness of the purpose of colonialism, which was to exploit and dominate the Africans. Mumia was illiterate and he could not understand. His appointees, like Mulama knew

the purpose of colonialism, and in comparison; he provides a sad comment on rebellious collaborators.

Wanga lagged behind in development and the neighbours who were under Mumia's appointees developed. However, the locations under Sakwa were comparatively less developed. In fact economic underdevelopment and political development have become legacies in Buluhya.

Source: Makers of Kenya's History, Nabongo Mumia, Simon Kenyanchui, Heinemann 1992; ISBN 9966-46-808-0