

The Forgotten Martyrs of Uganda

Persecution continues unabated in Uganda, claiming thousands of lives. As our **Special Correspondent** reports, for over a hundred years Ugandan Muslims have given thousands of 'martyrs' "unhymned, uncelebrated, uncannonised but nevertheless remembered."

CARNAGE went loose on May 22 in Namugongo, a small town 14 kilometres north of Kampala, the Ugandan capital. Heavily armed soldiers rampaged through the streets, allegedly in hot pursuit of 'bandits' accused earlier of attacking a satellite tracking station at Mpoma, near Namugongo. They failed to get them. Instead, fury was then vented on the innocent civilians.

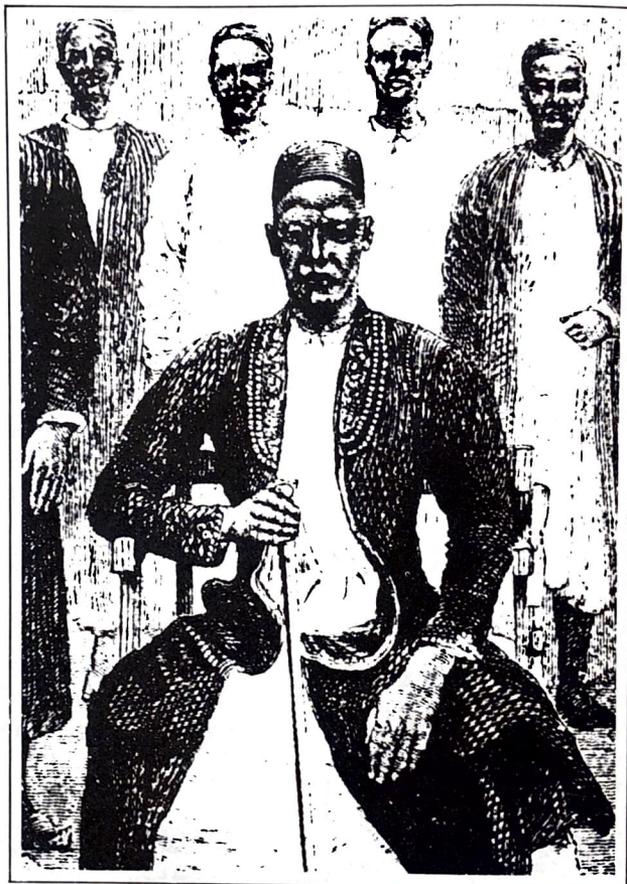
At the Anglican Seminary they killed students and their dean, ransacked the surrounding households hacking down peasants and their herds. Sacrilege was the order of the day when they descended on the nearby village of Kiro.

In the mosque compound, they opened fire indiscriminately. Worshipers performing their *dhuhr* (noon) prayers died along with the local *Imam*, Shaykh Yusuf Mullo. A French journalist, Jacques de Barrin, reporting for *Le Monde* noted, 'The vandals also like to commit acts of sacrilege. They burned down the small mosque at Kiro, after going to the trouble of slaughtering and roasting a pig inside its precincts and eating it off the pages of the Koran, which they used in lieu of plates'. When they left, there were 94 dead and a gutted mosque. In an unprecedented move, the Ugandan government issued a communique expressing its 'deep regret at the loss of human lives' and acknowledged in embarrassed terms, some army responsibility for the massacre.

A few hours after the soldiers left, a large crowd gathered in the mosque's compound. The decision to bury the dead immediately was unanimous. There were no young men to help in the grave digging; those not laying among the dead were either already buried or in the bush - where it is wise to be if you are young, Baganda and a Muslim.

The burial ceremony lasted the night. Women - with children strapped on their backs - helped the old men to dig. There were not enough tools. Some scratched the hard ground with their nails.

The Kiro dead were not washed. In



King Mutesa I; changed faith for political reasons

Islam only *shuhada* (martyrs) can be buried without the ritual wash. The bodies were lowered into the graves in their blood-soiled clothes. The burial ceremony was still continuing when somebody stood up next to a grave and gave the *adhān* (call to prayer). *Fajr* (dawn) prayer was performed among the unmarked graves surrounding the still smouldering mosque. 'Ugandan Islam', according to a group of historians, 'is one of the miracles of modern Africa. Besides increasing rapidly in quality and numbers, it is active and progressive. It is an exam-

ple, unique in its own way, of a religion from abroad that has been taken up, speedily assimilated and spread by African people who were far from the nearest great Islamic centres and who had little outside help or encouragement'.

But nowhere else in Africa has the history of Islam been so tragic. In Uganda, more people have died because of their religious convictions than anywhere else in the continent. The Ugandan Muslim community ranks high amongst those that have offered the most martyrs.

Even in the tragedy that is today's Uganda, the level of Muslim persecution remains unrivalled.

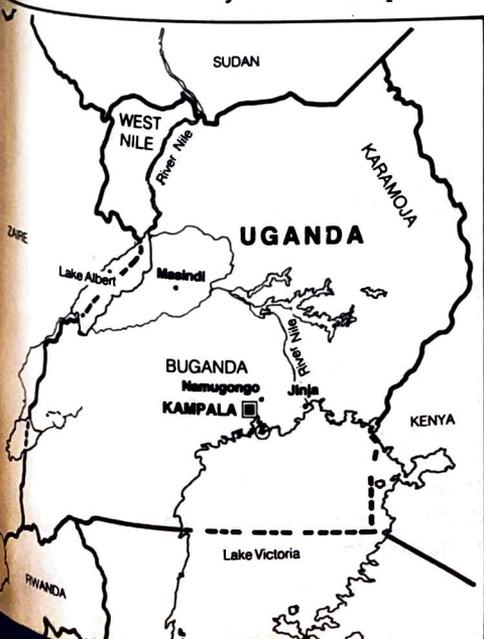
Thursday July 7, 1983 was a special day for the Muslims in Bulu village 25 miles west of Kampala. Muslims from the surrounding Mpigi district had descended in their hundreds to join them in performing the annual 'Id-ul-Fitr. It was merriment all around.

Then unwelcomed, a group of armed men in fatigue, entered the mosque, dragged the *Imam* and five others from the inner mosque and in full view slit open their throats before driving off from the horrified crowd. Two weeks later on July 22, Shaykh Abdul Razaq Matovu, the *Mufti* of Uganda publicly condemned the senseless killing of Abbas Katumba, Muhammad Segeriabene, Sulaman Ziwa, Musa Kaungezi, Muhammad Rwegeza and Shaykh Katmangira.

The Kiro and Bulu massacres bring back ennobling sentiments to the Muslims of Uganda. Mutesa's court witnessed the first rank of Muslims prepared to stand up and be counted for the sake of their faith.

Mutesa I ruled the central Kingdom of Buganda from 1867-1884. An absolute monarch, he wielded powers of life and death over his subjects all the more awesome, because, as the traditional ruler, he also commanded his subjects' unquestioned loyalty. An earnest man, he embraced and propagated Islam in Buganda and the surrounding dominions with all the seriousness he had brought to bear on anything he did.

Under his rule Islam flourished. Courtiers as well as pages followed in the steps of the King. Mutesa punished severely those who contravened or broke basic tenets. A full ministry was created at the royal court to ensure that people fasted during *Ramadhan*. Prayer marshalls patrolled



The Roots of Muslim Persecution

"IT is not in the interests of the British Government that Mohammedanism should receive any more adherents than we can help in Uganda as Muslims are proverbially difficult to manage and are always in their hearts opposed to the administration of a Christian power. In Uganda itself we are obliged to put up with the existence of people of this faith because they were here before we came; but I can see that it is decidedly not to the interests of the British government that we should actually assist the spread of this religion."

December 3, 1900. Ref: A11/1/53, Entebbe Archives, Busoga Outward, Harry Johnston, Special Commissioner for Uganda 1899 to 1901.



Henry Morton Stanley: 'Discoverer' of the source of the Nile

"I HAVE, indeed, undermined Islamism so much here that Mtesa has determined henceforth, until he is better informed, to observe the Christian Sabbath as well as the Muslim Sabbath, and the great captains have unanimously consented to this. He has further caused the Ten Commandments of Moses to be written on a board for his daily perusal - for Mtesa can read Arabic - as well as the Lord's Prayer and the golden commandment of our Savior, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." This is great progress for the few days that I have remained with him, and, though I am no missionary, I shall begin to think that I might become one if such success is feasible. But oh! that some pious, practical missionary would come here! What a field and harvest ripe for the sickle of civilization! Mtesa would give him anything he desired - houses, lands, cattle, ivory, etc.! He might call a province his own in one day. It is not the mere preacher, however, that is wanted here. The Bishops of Great Britain collected, with all the classic youth of Oxford and Cambridge, would effect nothing by mere talk with the intelligent people of Uganda. It is the practical Christian tutor, who can teach people how to become Christians, cure their diseases, construct dwellings, understand and exemplify agriculture, and turn his hand to anything, like a sailor - this is the man who is wanted. Such a one, if he can be found, would become the saviour of Africa. He must be tied to no church or sect, but profess God and his Son and the moral law, and live a blameless Christian, inspired by liberal principles, charity to all men, and devout faith in Heaven. He must belong to no nation in particular but to the entire white race. Such a man or men, Mtesa, Emperor of Uganda, Usogo, Unyoro,

and Karagwe - an empire 360 geographical miles in length, by 50 in breadth - invites to repair to him. He has begged me to tell the white men that, if they will only come to him, he will give them all they want. Now, where is there in all the pagan world a more promising field for a mission than Uganda? Colonel Linant de Bellefonds is my witness that I speak the truth, and I know he will corroborate all I say. The Colonel, though a Frenchman, is a Calvinist, and has become as ardent a wellwisher for the Waganda as I am. Then why further spend needlessly vast sums upon black pagans of Africa who have no example of their own people becoming Christians before them? I speak to the Universities Mission at Zanzibar and to the Free Methodists at Mombasa, to the leading philanthropists, and the pious people of England. "Here, gentlemen, is your opportunity - embrace it! The people on the shores of the Nyanza call upon you. Obey your own generous instincts, and listen to them; and I assure you that in one year you will have more converts to Christianity than all other Missionaries united can number. The population of Mtesa's kingdom is very dense; I estimate the number of his subjects at 2,000,000. You need not fear to spend money upon such a mission, as Mtesa is sole ruler, and will repay its cost tenfold with ivory, coffee, otter skins of a very fine quality, or even in cattle, for the wealth of this country in all this products is immense. The road here is by the Nile, or via Zanzibar, Ugogo, and Unyanyembe. The former route, so long as Colonel Gordon governs the countries of the Upper Nile, seems the most feasible."

Letter of Henry Morton Stanley inviting missionaries to Uganda. From: Daily Telegraph, 15, November 1875.



East African Muslims: An old and established community

the villages.

Hunters, however, felt that Mutesa gave them a raw deal. He prohibited them to use dogs while hunting. It was a decision bound to cause trouble because many at Mutesa's court were hunters, but more significant, was the explicit threat Islam had come to represent to the status quo under which they prospered.

They vowed to take revenge. It took the form of a palace intrigue and the role of the newly arrived church missionaries in it is suspected by many historians of the period. For some time Mutesa had noticed that the size of his parayer crowd and those taking their meals in the palace was shrinking.

Mutesa expressed his anxiety to a group of courtiers and they 'filled him in'. All his Muslim pages were not impressed by his profession of faith, the Kabaka (King) was told. They cold-shouldered his parties because they accused the King's butcher of being a pagan. They also whispered that the King was not circumcised and particularly frowned at this because it allegedly made him ineligible to lead prayers.

An enraged Mutesa summoned to court Mudduawulira, the head of the pages and the *muadhhdhin* (the man

calling to prayer) who, according to some accounts, was also the most intelligent and preferred page at the court during the time. Mudduawulira strode into court unbowed by the earthly majesty and pomp of the Kabaka. The courtiers held their breath as Mutesa took his seat.

"Is it true, as I have heard, that you no longer eat meat in the palace?" Mutesa asked. Mudduawulira replied, "Yes sir". "Even the meat I myself slaughter?" the King continued. "Yes sir, even if the animal was killed by you", Mudduawulira maintained "Why?" the King persisted in the challenge. "Your excellency knows from the Qur'an that these are the laws of Islam which I was taught and have to follow", Mudduawulira responded as he threw the challenge back to the King.

The audience looked on in disbelief because before Mudduawulira no page had dared to address the Kabaka with such candour. Mudduawulira's uncompromising stand carried only one price: death.

Mudduawulira and all pages together with their sympathisers were rounded up and taken to Namugongo. Mukajanga, Mutesa's executioner burnt all of them.

Islam was thus denied the services

of a young, brave and dedicated group. It was a blow from which Islam never really recovered in Uganda. They were the best in Buganda at the time. Immediately after the incident Mutesa found it difficult to find a suitable envoy to despatch outside the country. A chief told him, "We have recently killed the learned men whom we should send there, for they had learned much and were clever".

The world outside knows little about the valiant death of Mudduawulira and his seventy colleagues-in-faith, because no statue neither pantheon has gone up to immortalise their names for posterity. The Pope will not visit their unmarked graves when he visits Uganda next year and therefore they will not become a media event like their Catholic counterparts.

But the Uganda Muslims will forever remember when the Namugongo 70 were given the choice of serving either their monarch or their Maker. They chose their Maker and died brutally for the choice like those who died recently in Bulo (1983) and in Kiro, this May.

Perhaps it is time Muslims told the world that in Uganda they too have their martyrs. Unhymned, uncelebrated, uncanonised but nevertheless remembered. ■