

Revisting Ignatius Musaazi

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Musaazi was more pan-Africanist than nationalist, a model politician who still baffles historians

Ignatius Kangave Musaazi, whose body lies at the heroes' corner of Kololo Independence grounds, is an icon of Uganda's political history and independence struggle.

However, the country still has a long way to go to understand and utilize Musaazi's legacy, as prominent academics and politicians pointed out at a memorial lecture dedicated to him at Makerere University late last year.

For many, it has remained a baffle that the man imprisoned 37 times by the colonial government, who founded the first farmers association, the first trade union and first political party in Uganda, suddenly disappeared from the limelight at the eve of independence and thereafter. From the late 1950s, the public heard again of Musaazi during the Uganda Patriotic Movement campaigns of 1980 and after the National Resistance Movement came to power in 1986 as the regime treated him as a rehabilitated national item.

But US-based academic and pan-Africanist activist Prof Horace Campbell, while delivering the Ignatius K. Musaazi memorial lecture, emphasized that Musaazi was consciously more pan-Africanist than nationalist, let alone not caring for office. Secondly, Musaazi, born in 1905, never retired; even after independence, he continued working with pan-Africanists beyond Uganda, till his death in 1990.

Of course Campbell, and other speakers, couldn't succeed to suppress all the frustrations of what seems a betrayal of Musaazi's legacy by a chain of opportunists that have led Uganda in several sectors since independence. He seemed to place his hopes on the youth, but not without a bit of worry.

"Musaazi organized his pan-Africanist movement in the era of the slate; but will the youth of today and tomorrow who are organizing in the era of the iPads and iPods care to learn from him?" Campbell rhetorically asked, while calling for deeper study of the history of Africa and Musaazi, and the significance of political independence.

A son of a landed chief that was so privileged to do studies in the United Kingdom as early as 1924, Musaazi resigned his teaching job at Makerere to start organizing farmers. He also quit his well-paying job of assistant inspector of schools, which had helped him to build nationwide networks with the ideological and cultural masses, to advance the struggle for the African's dignity and independence.

He formed farmers associations, the first trade union (drivers association) and the first political party in Uganda. Musaazi was hailed for opposing the conscription for the Second World War, arguing the war meant destruction of the environment and enrichment of the imperial powers. Musaazi was the first black Western-educated African to denounce colonial rule in Uganda. He was imprisoned in 1942 for saying it was colonialism, rather than the Germans, that was the threat to world and peoples' peace.

He called his political party the Congress (Uganda National Congress, formed in 1952), after inspiration from the Indian Congress party that had attained independence in 1947. He also conceived the UNC as a branch of a global movement that had other branches like the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa.

In fact, UNC's launch date was deliberately chosen to coincide with anti-colonial events in South Africa; it coincided with the Boer day, to express solidarity with the struggle of the South African people against apartheid. That is how his UNC had external "embassies", like the one in Cairo, Egypt headed by John Kalekyezi, father to Maj Gen Kale Kayihura.

Campbell, himself a colleague and family friend of Musaazi, narrated several heroic incidents he had with Musaazi since the 1970s. See, even during Idi Amin's time, Musaazi operated an underground activism, utilizing many facilities of the university like stationery and the main hall. Campbell was then based at Makerere.

"We [Musaazi and I] used university resources to publish many underground pamphlets in Luganda, Kiswahili and English. We had young men like Mike Mukula in our network, and even bumped into a network that included Kahinda Otafiire," he reminisced with a long laughter.

At the function, not only Campbell, but most speakers, hailed Musaazi for having been a selfless pan-Africanist that endeavoured for a better Uganda rather than a comfortable seat for himself and who remained around to criticize and organize internally against the Amin regime while many that had been key beneficiaries of independence ran into exile.

During Amin's time, Musaazi could travel and meet revolutionaries like Walter Rodney in Europe, North and South America and come back to organize underground resistance.

"In 1976, Musaazi came to see me in Trinidad and Tobago where I was teaching. We went to Guyana and we met Rodney and we asked him to stay in Uganda. When Bishop Luwum was killed [in 1977], Musaazi fled to the UK and continued organizing, later coming back to join UPM," Campbell said.

Intricate legacy

Enigma still surrounds Musaazi's sudden drop from the political radar at independence. Makerere university political science don Simba Salie Kayunga, who is soon to publish a book about Musaazi, says Musaazi told him that he hinged his vision on the circumstances that led to Omukama Kabalega and Kabaka Mwanga being captured together under the protection of a Langi chief.

"Why did we fight ourselves instead of combining efforts against the Europeans from the start?" Kabalega reportedly asked Mwanga, in captivity.

Hence, according to Simba, Musaazi wasn't against traditional institutions. He asked the Kabaka to be head of UNC, but when he objected, Musaazi asked the Pokino (Chief of Buddu county) who also declined.

Musaazi strongly believed that nationalist activists could treasure, respect and subordinate themselves to traditional leaders as was the case in Botswana where the nationalist struggle was wholly behind King Seretse Khama. Relying on the Bible, he believed in and aspired to a benevolent monarchy that could wrest justice from chiefs and colonial government.

Musaazi's work methods were such that though he was the brains and chief organiser behind the first trade union, the Uganda Motor Drivers' Association, when it was formed in 1938, he permitted James Kivu to be its officially registered head.

Simba quoted Musaazi as having told him in 1988: "When Obote was proposed to replace me as leader of UNC in 1959, he telephoned me saying, 'You have made me what I am, how can I replace you?' I then told him, 'I have groomed you, you are my son and I have no problem if they have proposed you to replace me.'" That was Musaazi, the magnanimous gentleman who preferred justice to pomp.

Building on the lecture's theme 'I.K. Musaazi and the Essence of Independence', Prof Tarsis Kabwegyere said Musaazi "wasn't an enjoyer of history, but a carrier of history; his job wasn't in office, but in restoring our independence." He described Musaazi as a man with ideological clarity who demonstrated that people don't have to follow a leader as a person but follow the person's ideas and methodologies.

"His method was to make history, not to take office," said Kabwegyere, to which Campbell added: "Makerere University has a moral duty to rewrite Uganda's history so as to show the relations between global pan-Africanism and the anti-colonial struggle."

To Campbell, central and primary in Musaazi's legacy is the zeal for cognitive justice for the black race. Giving five reasons why Africa is the future centre of human civilization, Campbell challenged the youth of Africa and Diaspora to acquire the four key technologies that will control the future; namely, the nano, bio, cogno and info technologies.

Campbell said it's with this fear at the back of their mind, that the Western world is hatching the Human Cognome project that seeks to reverse-engineer the human brain and interfere, at will, with peoples' cognitive activities like language and instincts.

"The West wants to reengineer the human brain and create robots superior to the current ones which have limited cognitive technology. Research has shown that black people, especially the people of East Africa, have the oldest and highest cognition capacities," Campbell told The Observer. "Musaazi deeply knew centuries of Africa's independence; it's no wonder nobody wants the youth to learn from him or similar people."

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