The Dynamics of the Nyabingi Religion

‘Nyabingi’ is indestructible: thus the break up of the agitation and the arrest of its adherents would not convince anyone of the futility of the adherents’ claims but would only point to the ill-luck of the chosen media and to the fact that the Nyabingi had left them to settle elsewhere. It does, however, have a salutary effect in causing others to be more modest before claiming to be possessed by Nyabingi.

Long before the European invasion, Nyakairima-Ka-Muzoora, a Mukiga from Kigezi, who was endowed with prognosticative powers and enormous experience, prophesied of the impending colonial invasion. He foretold that people with wings like butter/flies and the skin of babies were going to invade and conquer the whole land. He said further that these people would come in granaries which run on ropes. These were motorcars which travel on roads. He warned that these people would alienate children from their parents and societies (colonial education and elitist modes of life). He also said that these people ‘ate’ land (deprived people of their land); would bring a new religion which would replace Emandwa, Nyabingi, and so on, and that this new religion would be worshipped by all people. He said the new rule would last forever, and so on (Ngorogoza 1969, Aseka 2005).
In his discussion of the locus, rise, importance and functions of the African traditional seers, Aseka brings out their contributions especially on the foretelling of the impending colonial invasion. He explains how they provided functionally useful leadership in times of complex social conjunctures by telescoping into the future and foretelling impending social scenarios and possibilities. He makes a cursory generalised reference to the functions of their religions and prognostications. He explains that these traditional religious forecasts into the future were instrumental in characterising community to explorers, European visitors in the interior and establishment of missionary work, and subsequently, the imposition of the colonial state.

Nyakairima-Ka-Muzoora’s prognostications had thus prepared the people psychologically for the impending colonial invasion. However, he did not tell the people the day and time when these events would take place and what people needed to do to avert them. However, it should not be taken that the people in this region were totally ignorant of the invasion, but neither were they ready nor well equipped to resist it.

**Ideological Underpinnings**

This chapter deals with the forms of religions in the area. It studies factors that gave dominance to Nyabingi religion in social, religious and political affairs of the area; the forces that it represented, its character, objects and the developments. Among other things, it questions the materiality and historicity of the Nyabingi Movement, the character and functions of Nyabingi and how it related to people’s lives in this area that was largely undifferentiated at the time of colonial invasion. It explores how this religion was transformed into a material political force at the moment of colonial invasion, and the historical circumstances that dictated its transformation into a social movement and a popular ideology for liberation. It seeks explanations why and how Nyabingi religion among the competing religions developed and took the initiative to resist colonialism, the socio-political and cultural circumstances that gave rise to the Nyabingi Movement and how it cut across the whole society. It studies why these peasants chose the identity of religion amidst other various identities.

Marx noted in *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law* that ‘religious distress is at the same time the oppression of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people’ (Adas, 1979; see also Marx and Engels, 1958).
Can the Nyabingi Movement be dismissed as merely ‘religious fanaticism’ of illiterate, superstitious peasants led by religious sentiments and fears? Can the peasant resistances be dismissed as reactionary ‘savagery’, ‘anti-European’, ‘anti-civilisation’ and ‘anti-progress’ - that is, against virtues which colonialism purported to represent? Is it correct that Kigezi was a difficult country which had been a refuge of outlaws and bad characters, with a resulting mixing of type? (1911 BCR). What explains British colonialists’ hostility towards Nyabingi religion while at the same time using European religions to penetrate the region? Given that this region was still at a low level of production, undifferentiated, with no developed state structures or army, what explains its inhabitants’ choice of upholding militant armed resistance? Can it be dismissed simply, as some scholars have done, that violence was endemic in pre-colonial African societies; a Hobbesian situation which one commentator explains thus: ‘...in indigenous African experience, life was cheap and full of fear. Only often one’s own life was only saved by violence....’ (Carothers 1954).

This was similar to Roscoe’s representation of the inhabitants of Kigezi. He projected them as the most unruly people he had met in all his journeys. To him, everyone was still in a state of nature, without respect for humanity. Everyone lived in a state of fear of being murdered by neighbours. In this anarchical situation, everyone had to depend on individual protection all the time. To him, they were still driven by emotions, instinct and the love for self-preservation rather than being guided by reason, which he considered as the explanation why these people were easily aroused to anger against each other, and why they used their spears freely, wounding or killing anyone upon the slightest provocation (Roscoe, op. cit.).

This was the Western presentation of the colonised people of Kigezi as ‘the primitives’. Gallagher and Robinson’s (1953) vehement defence and glorification of imperialism is demonstrative enough. In their Eurocentric approach, they used the nationalist movements in Egypt to quickly condemn and dismiss anti-colonial movements as a ‘pseudo-nationalist reaction against foreign influence.’ In the same vein, Hardwick (1904) castigated the Africans for imprisoning Africa, the largest continent in perpetual barbarism and darkness. He praised the European colonial powers, which, in their march to irresistible civilization were dividing Africa amongst themselves.

At the time of colonial invasion, the area was characterised by polytheism. Whereas some schools including Judaism advance the movement from polytheism to monotheism, other schools base on the proliferation of new
religions to advance the monotheism to polytheism thesis while others advance
duotheism, from polytheism or monotheism or no religion, and so on. These
demonstrate that there was no fixed order, no fixed formula. Among their religions
were Emandwa, Ryangombe, Mugasya, Kahukeiguru, Kazooba Bitindangyezi,
Esiriba and Biheeko Nyabingi.

From its doctrine of action, militancy and courage, Nyabingi came to be known
as Rutatiina-Mireego - one who never fears bows and arrows. Its other names
included Omukama and Nyinekyaro, meaning ruler. It took yet another name in
1928, namely, Muzeire-Kasente, that is a parent who accepted money.

Being at a low level of production, with backward productive forces, many
peasants were still subjected to the mercy of nature. They still attributed most of
what they could not understand and their problems to the supernatural. That is
why they had so many religions, still at individual and household levels. They had
not reached a level of monotheism. While it looked as an ideology of liberation
and resistance, Nyabingi religion was an ideology of domination and exploitation
by abagirwa. They used it to extract surplus value from peasants, and used it to
threaten them. On the other hand, heads of households, who were the spiritual
heads and mediums of the other religions, also used these religions to dominate
those below them. It was in these circumstances that Nyabingi gradually gained
dominance over others.

Nyabingi religion depended on coercion, intimidation, curses, threats and
mysterious deaths. These were plotted and executed secretly by abagirwa. However, it also gained popularity because of its spiritual and temporal ideals.
In social conflicts, it was Nyabingi religion which identified with the oppressed
peoples, preached emancipation from oppression and exploitation. It provided
a foundation for solidarity, courage and action against the oppressors. (Philipps
Report of 31 July 1919; Lacger, 1959; Turyahikayo-Rugyema, op. cit.).

Nyabingi extended to Rwanda, Burundi, Tanganika, Congo, Mpororo,
Nkore, and so on. With colonialism, peasants mobilised under Nyabingi religion
into armed resistance for over two decades. Despite increased state repression,
massacres, imprisonment and deportations, Nyabingi resistances continued flaring
up between 1910 and the mid-1930s. Colonialism had to concede how ‘purely
military measures have been proved useless’.
Regionalisation of the Nyabingi Movement Strategies: The Rwanda Factor

By the time of the colonial invasion, Nyabingi was fast developing. The historicity of the Nyabingi Movement has to be located in pre-colonial feudal Rwanda. The Rwanda feudal state had been founded by Abatutsi ethnic group. In their state-formation project, they conquered and incorporated under their rule different groups of people. These peoples’ differences ranged from linguistic and cultural, to geographical, physiological, to levels of development and modes of production. This dominant group gradually learnt of the inevitability of holding all these groups under state control at minimum costs while exploiting them. It had to advance beyond the exclusive dependence on force by consolidating its rule. This was done by creating and spreading oppressive ideologies over the dominated subjects; and according favours, privileges, rewards and political appointments to some individuals under their control. Emandwa religious institution, which the ruling Abatutsi group could either have created or appropriated from the subjects for their ideological ends, was gradually transformed into the dominant ideology. This was accomplished by institutionalising it into a state religion, with the king as its head. This was crucial for ideological and political reasons - to sanction and legitimise their rule and oppression, while keeping their subjects in fear.

The Creation of Local Official Language Strategy

Language plays a multiplicity of functions. It is an indispensable tool of communication between peoples, in establishing and maintaining unity, in cognition, mobilisation, leadership, war propaganda, dissemination and preservation of knowledge and ideas. In a class society, language expresses power relations. It is the ruling class that controls and defines the ruling language. The colonised have to adopt and follow the produced language and ideas. This, however, does not imply that they are devoid of their own languages. The issue is that their socio-economic and political powerlessness precludes their linguistic constructions from the dominant discourses and praxes.

In Rwanda, the deliberate application of the language of the ruling group - state language ‘Kinyarwanda’ - resulted into two major political and social developments. The first one was the gradual loss of the identities of the different groups that had been merged into this political arrangement. This loss of identity was reflected in the subordination of their cultures and modes of existence and
the gradual declining and petering out of their original cultures and languages, through their adoption of the language of the state.

The second major happening was the state’s deliberate ideological political categorisation of peoples under its fold into three groups - *Abatutsi*, *Abahutu* and *Abatwa*. It was based mainly on their locus within the power structure, the production process in this set-up, property relations and the physique of the peoples. This gradually became the basis for economic and political privileging and marginalisation. The colonialists skilfully harnessed and accentuated them for their own interests. This ordering of things underlay the pogroms that rocked the GLR from 1959 to the genocide of 1994. Some find it methodologically important for scholarship, politics, analyses, conflicts and conflict resolution.

It would be ahistorical and dangerous to assume that all the peoples in the surrounding areas were conquered and incorporated into the Rwanda Kingdom. Many fought off these invasions. Others fled such invasions and settled in distant areas they considered safe from harassment of the Rwandese forces; (Turyahikayo - Rugyema 1975).

In the process of conquering, incorporation and subordination, the subjects of the state were faced with its persistent crude subordination, oppression and exploitation, without chance of airing out grievances. It should be noted that the ruling class controlled and manipulated the three groups of people through politics, patronage, ideology, force, military, *inter alia*. This political arrangement generated continuous tensions and conflicts.

However, as their struggles failed to yield independence from the strong Rwandese state, they devised other forms of resistance. The oppressive and exploitative feudal relations became fertile ground for the rise and development of the Nyabingi Movement. This militant movement emerged making popular promises of emancipating the subalterns. This became an important mobilising and recruiting device for the movement.

Confronted with the insurgent Nyabingi Movement, the Rwanda State had to wage a vicious war against it. In this contest for space, the state succeeded in hunting down and killing most of Nyabingi social actors. The survivors had to flee to remote areas, where they continued broadening the movement. Thus, while the Rwanda state had the initial victory, it grasped the reality that the struggle had just begun. The movement was increasing very fast, in membership and geographical space, in its activities and ideological work.
The Rwanda state found itself in a fix when the movement opposed its alliance with the newly arrived German imperialists. The Rwanda state’s compliance with imperialist interests provided Nyabingi Movement with the nationalist stance. The movement was totally opposed to the notion of allowing foreigners in Rwanda, and their subsequent interference with the Rwandese affairs. Even those subjects who had enjoyed some preferential treatment and state patronage found themselves joining the movement against this invasion. The political stand of the movement against this new threat gave it more strength, popularity, credibility and legitimacy. That was its materiality.

The Tanganyika Connection

The Rwanda state joined with German forces to wage war against the Nyabingi Movement. However, instead of wiping it out as expected, it had the unexpected consequence of spreading the movement. This was because the social actors who escaped the wanton killings, or were arrested and banished fled to other places where they continued organising the movement. Muhumuza and her son Ndungusi, both from the royal palace, were among the latter group.

Muhumuza, daughter of Nkanza, was the wife of Rwabugiri, then King of Rwanda. When Muhumuza was defeated, she was arrested and exiled to Bukoba, in Tanganyika, then a German colony.

Being a revolutionary who was knowledgeable about the mechanics of power, politics and diplomacy, and about the geography of the region, she managed to escape from exile and went to Rutobo, which later became part of Kigezi. Instead of making this area a sanctuary, she began to establish power over it. Given her negative experience with the Germans, she clearly knew the virulence and manipulations of imperialism and that the whole region was coming under serious threat.

Then, having lived in the place, she had political ideas and knew the invaders would come. Thirdly, she could not lower herself to live like the commoners. She, therefore, transformed the area into her base for organisation and mobilisation, recruitment and initiation into the Nyabingi Movement. So, the area became the base for inaugurating the anti-colonial Nyabingi Movement in Uganda.

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29 The name Ndungusi in this book is variably spelt as Ndugusi, Ndungutsi, Nduguse, Ndugutzi and Ndunungutzi.
Pre-colonial State Formations in Kigezi

At the eve of colonialism in Kigezi, there were two major differences. The first category was areas which were highly differentiated, with some classes living off the surplus labour of others. These were areas where states had formed or where chiefdoms existed. These included Bufumbira, Kayonza, Kinkizi and Mpororo. As such, Nyabingi’s *abagirwa* had to use intimidation, coercion and threats to convince the rest to accept the religion. It is noteworthy that whenever there was social conflict, Nyabingi automatically became a religion of the oppressed and exploited majority.

In the rest of the region, where classes were in their nascent formation or where they had not come into formation, *abagirwa* were able to identify some privileged sections, groups and individuals there and the social grievances prevailing. They, then, identified with the majority. In such societies, the dominant lineages and family heads became the object. If the lineage accepted Nyabingi religion, then new objects of its struggle would be found among other lineages.

It is of interest that at time, *Abatwa* used Nyabingi religion to raid peasants. However, the same peasants gradually adopted the same religion to defend themselves against *Abatwa*. With *Abatwa* and the peasants, Nyabingi had begun as an ideology of domination and then had transformed into an ideology of resistance. To understand the acceptance of Nyabingi religion amidst all these competing religions one must go beyond its intimidating and coercive character to the social grievances and problems that it addressed. Without this, it may be hard to understand the issues, since peasants had the capacity to resist this religion as they did others.

The Nature and Ideological Underpinnings of Nyabingi

Nyabingi was created in the form of a woman - a female spirit. This spirit was assumed to be living under the earth. They assumed that this spirit often appeared to people, with rapid transformative powers into feminine personalities. It was assumed that it could transform into different forms of destitution, like that of a desperate, poor old woman. Their interpretation of this was that Nyabingi would do so to punish whoever mistreated it or scorned it or refused to welcome it or denied it hospitality. People feared that Nyabingi would punish them with diseases, deny them marriage, cause them death, and so on. The moral lessons from this included discipline and reforms, enforced humanity, generosity and humility amongst the oppressed. All these feminine imaginations about Nyabingi
and the dominance of selecting females into its service suggest strongly that Nyabingi could have been created by the dominated, oppressed women.

The practical approach of Nyabingi religion to people’s problems and its spiritual aspirations increased its acceptance and popularity among the oppressed of the society. Despite its intimidation and coercion, more women came into its fold. These worked hard to spread its fame. This arose mainly from women’s resistance to male domination and oppression.

The pronouncements and promises drew more people into Nyabingi’s fold. They were also drawn into this institution for their spiritual beliefs and partly in fear of its powers and malice. Abagirwa were responsible for defending it theoretically and militarily. They promoted it, spread it and recruited new membership to its fold.

Its increasing dominance can also be traced to the fact that women were more united through production, polygamy and extended families. As women went on the same routes to work or met more often than men, and worked together in fields, it became easy for them to give out freely their individual expressions about Nyabingi, the latest rumours, miracles, teachings, and so on. Abagirwa would command men to build its shrines, feed those in its service, offer it sacrifices and dedicate young daughters to its service. This was known as okutweija.

The situation was different with other religions. These were mild and were headed by oppressors like nyineeka, who interceded for the rest of the household. The various conflicts between him and the other members of the family made him more of a petty tyrant protected by supernatural powers than a mere arbitrator. Worse still, men tended to exploit such situations by enforcing obedience through religious threats.

The invoking of gods and spirits of the dead by old people to punish the big-headed or insolent was a common practice to enforce obedience, exact labour, and so on. Whoever challenged the established order or refused to carry out their wishes became a target. From this religious role, household heads derived political powers. Thus, the position of women and other minorities was that of subordination.

To side-step men’s oppression, the minorities found refuge in Nyabingi. Abagirwa made it clear that nyabingi did not approve of quarrels amongst its membership. Of course, this was another way of maintaining control over the membership. Abagirwa were mostly women. It emphasised moral discipline, love, generosity, and so on; and gave rewards to good people in form of children, livestock, and so on.
As the privileged sections of society were the foundation of its expansion and the object of its struggles, both its membership and leadership were dominated by women and youths. It should be noted, however, that *abagirwa* lived off the surplus of labour of peasants and enjoyed some privileges. Therefore, the so-called ‘liberation’ of these sections of society was a basis for the expansion of these privileges.

Furthermore, Nyabingi’s demands on *nyineeka* undermined men’s status and infallibility at home and in society. This was worsened by women’s positions as *abagirwa*, who would order men to carry out Nyabingi’s wishes. This attracted more marginalised peoples into its fold.

### The Material Base of Nyabingi Movement

When people fell ill, they would attribute it to Nyabingi or any other spirit. They would consult *omugirwa*, *omufumu* (traditional doctor) or *abaraguza* (seers) on what was to be done. These would apply their skills and cunning to diagnose the problem and prescribe the required sacrifices. These professionals did not offer free services. The clients had to pay *omukiimbo*. The same applied to the rain makers – *abajubi* or *abahaniki*.

*Abagirwa* were supposed to intercede for people in times of crises, treat some sicknesses, and so on. It should be noted that their initiation involved learning medicine and the treatment of different diseases; learning how to expand the imagination in cases of new, unique crises, and so on. In the same vein, they were taught how to create fears, curse offenders, fight and lead people in defence of Nyabingi. People believed that Nyabingi cured both physiological and psychological diseases, and those caused by supernatural forces.

There were two forms of surplus extraction by *abagirwa* through tribute in form of sacrifices to Nyabingi. These were *okuterekyerera* and *okutweija*. These involved sacrificing cattle, food, meat, beer, young girls, and so on. Whoever asked Nyabingi for a favour had to give some offering or gift. Such requests included children, husband, cattle, good harvests, healing for the sick and so on. Nyabingi was assumed to be the source of all things. Pledges to Nyabingi included young girls, cows and so on. Those who did not have the means would pledge to bring them later. People were taught that if Nyabingi asked for something and the concerned person failed to bring it, then Nyabingi would take offence and refuse the requests. In other words, Nyabingi was not necessarily for the very poor, without the wherewithal. Whoever promised something would have to fulfil the promise. So, requests to Nyabingi and sacrifices were mainly in material
form and the latter was compulsory. This was the surplus value that maintained abagirwa and their source of wealth.

Nyabingi gained its popularity from the interests it appeared to project and fight for. Its abagirwa preached resistance by the down-trodden and articulated their interests. Peasants found this very acceptable. What convinced them most was that those in its service could not abandon the membership in times of hardships. Instead, new leadership came up when the old one got separated from membership.

People who believed in Nyabingi consulted abagirwa for its consent before going to war. Then, those in its service would exercise their imagination and judge the situation. If peasants learnt that it had sanctioned the war, then they would go to it knowing that Nyabingi was leading them. Its followers believed that Nyabingi would not lead them to war if it did not sanction it. It was assumed that Nyabingi would punish them if they fought badly and lost the war that it had sanctioned. This forced them to fight courageously. Nyabingi religion preached action, courage, and encouraged struggles against oppression and exploitation. In these circumstances, where the enemy was an already established strong institution, secrecy was a sine qua non. Therefore, abagirwa stressed the importance of secrecy, and punished all traitors under the cover of Nyabingi.

In the absence of any organised force to protect the people from internal and external threats, the oppressed found a vent in Nyabingi. New developments led women to the fore in some of these military ventures. This was greatly achieved with the emergence of colonialism. People prayed to Nyabingi and dedicated their lives, relatives and property to its care. Colonial repression and witch-hunt forced the membership of Nyabingi to become very secretive and change the methods and time of worship.

Mobilisation Strategies Encompassing the Populations’ Majority, Gender and Political Leadership Dynamics

The selection of young females into the ranks of Nyabingi religion was highly secretive, mysterious and frightening. This process always took place at night. The sign for the selected girl was a metallic rod, which would be placed in between the thighs of the chosen girl. From that morning, it would be clearly known how Nyabingi had selected so-and-so into its service. No-one would object or contradict this choice. The people would begin to respect and fear such girls.

Abagirwa carried out the secret missions of selection in the night so as to maintain the myth and sacredness of the exercise and institution. A breach of this
practice would have undermined the process, the Nyabingi institution and would have forced peasants, especially men, to resist such choices and the legitimacy of abagirwa. It was, therefore, imperative for abagirwa to make people believe that these were works of supernatural forces. The chosen girl would then go into the service of Nyabingi under a senior omugirwa.

Such girls would no longer engage in production, nor would they get married in the customary way to bring in wealth in form of the bride price. The bride price was very important in wealth accumulation and in acquiring wives. In these societies, women felt some pride and enjoyed some rights and prestige, if they brought in wealth in form of bride price. Okutweija divorced those girls from the honour of women. They could not live a married life that they might have been dreaming of and rear their own children. Such chosen females could only marry by the high priest giving them freely to a man that Nyabingi wanted to reward.

The chosen girl(s) would be initiated into its secrets and defence. This allowed them the chance to hold instruments of coercion: the spear, the traditional big knife, and so on. Nyabingi institution ruled that everyone in its service had to use these weapons for its defence. While this seemed to extricate these females from the direct oppression and exploitation of nyineeka, they had now come under the direct control of the high priests/priestesses and the strict discipline of Nyabingi institution. Abagirwa believed in Nyabingi, feared it, and had to obey its commands. As such, this choice deprived them of private lives with personal wishes, actions and programmes.

These expensive economic sacrifices became a source of discontent and fear among men. However, they could not say anything for fear of Nyabingi’s reprisals. This worsened when abagirwa began accumulating wealth in form of cattle, which they had acquired from men in the name of Nyabingi. Though many men harboured some internal grudges, they could not express them openly. This was another reason why it was essential to initiate all those in the service of Nyabingi into defence of Nyabingi, themselves and their property. Abagirwa had, therefore, to be militant and were always armed.

In a context of continuous armed struggles between Nyabingi followers and the established order, privileged groups and persons, Nyabingi religion had to preach more vigorously, ideas of insurgency and the application of instruments of violence by the oppressed. This was a departure from what obtained where weapons were the exclusive monopoly of men.

As Nyabingi was against armed established order, its fold had to be militant for self-preservation. They also had to broaden its social base among the population.
As already seen, this became easy as women would meet other women so easily in the gardens and fields, or as they worked or while going to dig and transmit information about Nyabingi, its exploits, and so on. That way, they were able to learn about Nyabingi and gave free expression of their desires.

Women were also in a better position to pass on the teachings and influence of Nyabingi to the young ones. All these made Nyabingi get rooted into their lives. Therefore, there were many female *abagirwa*, who organised, led and sustained these anti-colonial resistances under Nyabingi for over two and half decades. It also partly explains why it was impossible to defeat Nyabingi militarily despite superior arms, technology and skills.

In total, Nyabingi religion tried to address the socio-political, economic and military issues of the people. So, the anti-colonial struggles were not a continuation of the Hobbesian situation where ‘human life has no value amongst them’. ADC Sullivan to PCWP on 30/9/1913; PCWP to CS 10 October 1913. They were a response to a social crisis and had specific objectives of self-emancipation and preservation. Nyabingi religion gave resistance ideological guidance, leadership and strength. The military option, under Nyabingi, was the feasible option for them against the invading armed forces. In this contest, Nyabingi sided with peasant resisters.

Being a new dynamic religion, it had developed a mechanism of providing new leadership and theories in times of crises. This shows that in a desperate situation, with no organisation, minorities usually resort to any forum, which allows them a platform for articulating their interests. In such circumstances, it gives them a chance for realising or defending their rights. It gives them some form of promise and sense of direction.

Religion, at this stage, increases in relating to the people’s material existence. It is only in religion that they find some solution.

In Nyabingi’s context, there was marked development in the role of women both in its service and defence right from pre-colonial to colonial Kigezi. As society changed, the Nyabingi institution also underwent changes. It developed very fast at the advent of colonialism.

Colonialism gave Nyabingi a broader platform for mobilisation and action. Anyone who mobilised peasants into armed struggles against the colonialists had to use Nyabingi. So, the first armed struggles were characterised by spontaneity, and were short-lived because of poor planning against the well-armed, sophisticated enemy forces. The colonial forces had continuous victory
over the Nyabingi Movement. However, the objective factor stems from the different levels of development of these contending forces.

In the war against the colonial powers Nyabingi became very vibrant. There were serious, long and bloody resistances emerging under the leadership of various personalities, with different historical origins, training, experience and knowledge of fighting. Some of the leaders were army deserters from colonial forces, and colonial chiefs. Others had returned from deportation, where they had acquired a lot of knowledge. Also, during their colonial service or detentions, they had made friends and allies in the enemy’s forces. Most important was the planning and timing of their struggle when the imperialist war was raging, their capacity to incorporate various sections of society into the movement, their ability to sustain the struggles for years without selling out and their willingness to die struggling.

When the colonialists invaded the area, the charismatic abagirwa took the initiative of studying the situation and mobilising people into militant resistance. The group had a long history of resistance to draw from and outstanding guidelines to follow. Colonialism was not the first threat. It only increased the number of adversaries Nyabingi had.

Abagirwa had had to defend their spiritual beliefs, inspiration, ideals and secular interests. Nyabingi was also the source of their social status. As already shown, abagirwa’s function, for people’s temporal and spiritual needs had increased. Tied to their roles was the accumulation process taking place. Their position had become lucrative as they accumulated livestock and other forms of wealth. As Nyabingi expanded to more lineages and areas, this meant broadening both their social and economic bases. The truth was that without Nyabingi, Abagirwa institution would be no more and so would be the privileges that accrued to that position.

In their encounter, colonialism had come by force, imposed itself, and had to survive by force. It cannot be forgotten that all states are armed institutions and must depend on coercion - whether they are organically developed from below or imposed from above. The presence and legitimacy of the colonial states were, therefore, contested bitterly. They attacked colonialism and its allies. As the former were hidden away, its local allies, who were the visible representatives of the system, became the immediate target. These lived nearest, were the men on the ground implementing the contested policies, imposing colonial demands, administering, judging cases, assessing and collecting taxes, and so on.
The Nyabingi Movement went through a transformation during the struggles. As the struggles intensified, some abagirwa took up Nyabingi’s personality. This was mainly for political and military purposes. The need for the transformation sprang from the conflicts between abagirwa and some lineage heads who opposed the war or defied being led by women to war.

Abagirwa realised the importance of this transformation in asserting their authority over the membership. It helped them to dictate commands and orders over the membership and maintain control over them. This had the effect of imposing discipline. It allowed them chance to deal with any individual(s) or group(s) with dissenting views in any way that they wished. It encouraged the peasant resisters into courageous struggle as they felt that they were led by Nyabingi’s personality. Their fears of Nyabingi increased. This helped to consolidate their resistance, beliefs, unity and secrecy. Its weakness was that the resisters were blinded by this illusion to attack the sophisticated enemy without retreat:

‘Nyabingi’ is indestructible: thus the break up of the agitation and the arrest of the adherents would not convince anyone of the futility of the adherents’ claims but would only point to the ill luck of the chosen media and to the fact that the ‘Nyabingi’ had left them to settle elsewhere. It does, however, have a salutary effect in causing others to be more modest before claiming to be possessed by Nyabingi (DC’s Report of 26 June 1919).

Colonialism had learnt that the character of the Nyabingi society ‘...does not shrink from organising attacks in force on fortified positions held by troops’. By 1930, the colonialists had understood the complex character of Nyabingi; ‘Nyabingi is a female spirit which is the god and religion of these people, and, therefore, the difficulty in eradicating the beliefs is extreme and will take years until education gradually helps to stamp it out’ (DC to PCWP on 29 May 1930). This was a correct prediction. Colonial education aimed to create an African that would be alienated from both his/her people and the colonisers in comprehension, behaviour, and ways of life, expectations, attitudes, judgment, consumption habits and tastes. It produced intellectuals whose existence would oscillate like pendulums. For example, among their people, they would tell the time based on the African conception of time – from day-break to dusk and from dusk to day-break. Africa has equal days and nights, and which are separated by darkness and daylight. Night time is for sleeping and day time is for active
social production. Time in Africa is not handicapped by seasonal changes which interrupt the time system.

The intellectuals would however have to shift their telling of time to the European conception as soon as they joined the Europeans and those in their system.

To the European, time begins at midnight to midday and from midday to midnight. While this made sense to those who lived in areas with erratic seasons, where darkness could start at midday, it could never make sense to the Africans. So, these African intellectuals would shift their time-telling from ‘one hour’ and say ‘7 a.m’.

The Europeanisation of African intellectuals spread to other areas of their lives: knowledge, understanding, religions, cultures, and so on. What is tragic is that African intellectuals have failed to consider this a problem. They tell different times according to their audience. Unfortunately, most of them have never experienced darkness at midday but equal days and nights.

Precursors to the Nyabingi Movement

Colonial invasion followed a series of crises that had hit the peasants and weakened them. A persistent disastrous drought had caused a great famine which resulted in untold deaths. This was followed by plague and other diseases. At the heels of these disasters followed Abatwa bands, who invaded them for food and killed many of the survivors. Those who survived and took refuge elsewhere, lost their cattle, lives or wives to the people they had run to. The survivors and returnees then confronted Belgian forces, followed by Germans.

The encounter between Belgian colonialists and peasants of Bugarama and Kitare concretises this. The peasants hid in rocks. They used ropes to lift their cattle up the rocks. When the adversaries came, peasants rolled rocks down on them. When they tried to shoot up at them, they hit the rocks and finally left defeated. Another case took place at Kavu, in which Belgians killed 35 peasants including 13 men, 16 women and six children and captured 120 cattle which they took to Kakarama on 21 March 1916. Le Général Commandant in Chief admitted this on 22 October 1916 and paid 170 heads of cattle. The colonial report of 6 September 1911 described the situation thus:

Apart from the recent change in European control which is in itself an unsettling factor in the native mind, two principle causes have continued to make the settlement of the district... slow and difficult... the severe famine which devastated Rukiga and the adjacent countries some four years ago - Rukiga was almost depopulated and the few
remaining inhabitants fell an easy prey to marauding bands of Batwa, a hill tribe from the south... The majority of the Abakiga took refuge in the neighbouring countries of Ruanda and of the Chief Makabarri and have only in the last two years commenced returning... in most cases the Abakiga lost the greater part of their stock, either from the famine, the Abatwa or from the heavy toll levied by the inhabitants of the countries they took refuge in as the price of their temporary sojourn (Kigezi District Monthly Report of 6 September 1911).

A focus on the subjective factors revealed that while the conditions of oppression were widespread, the peasants’ organisation against it was limited. The cause lies at their low level of production. The household was a self-satisfying economic unit in terms of material resources; and in response to crises, organisation at community level was still on ad hoc basis. There was no organised armed force or an in-built systematic defence system.

It was a time of profound crisis. In some cases, especially during the famine, some women had to carry out men’s roles like building shelter, when the men were too weak to do anything, or labouring for food to save their households from death, or going to relations or families of their original parents and so on. This had the effect of promoting them to a higher level than ever before.

Then that women began to hold weapons for self-defence in case of attack - when their husbands were very weak, sick, away or dead. Although the crises wiped out thousands of peasants, fragmented societies and forced many to flee, women and youths were released from the former strong male domination. Women became tougher and more resolute. They had more time to worship and practise Nyabingi religion, put their lives under its care and make a lot of requests and promises to it. Abagirwa increased in number, and assisted the people in solving their problems and sicknesses. This gave them chance to preach Nyabingi religion and broaden its base among the peasants.

With the advent of colonialism, all sections of society were forced into action. Members recalled the experience they had had with Nyabingi and the role its abagirwa had played. In areas which had not been seriously hit by the crises, the same old social relations obtained. There was a situation of struggles at various levels. At one level was the struggle with Belgian, German and British imperialism. At another level was a struggle against men’s domination at household level or against inefficient, exploitative chiefs by a cross-section of the society. At another level were struggles between minorities and other
dominating sections of society. There was also a level of spiritual struggles. The various religious beliefs struggled for supremacy and converts.

Interestingly, the prophecy of the colonial invasion foretold by Nyakairima-Ka-Muzoora had spread through the region, but the people did not take it seriously. They realised too late, and knew that defeat would be disastrous to them as individuals and as a people. They had no other option but to defend themselves, their lands and property.

It was at this time that *abagirwa* declared war against the invading force, and led the people to war. They promised to turn bullets and guns into water and chase away the Europeans, and so on.

On the other hand, the British lay claim to the area. They assigned themselves the role of liberating peasants from all these problems; and from ‘the alien Nyabingi, its *abagirwa* and their demands’, Makobore and his Bahima, crises like famine, *Abatwa*, paganism and above all, from anarchy and violence and from the terror of Germans and Belgians.

**Categorisation of the Nyabingi Movement**

The Nyabingi Movement can be divided into four periods. The first one was in the pre-colonial period. In this period, Nyabingi religion developed at the expense of other religions, mobilising peasants against internal enemies and external aggressors. Various peoples used it. As an instance, *Abatwa* used it to raid the peasants. Turnbull (1961) illustrates how peasants were prisoners of the supernatural and witchcraft, and how the Pygmies took advantage of the peasants’ backwardness to frighten them and deprive them of their property. These peasants gradually adopted the same Nyabingi religion to defend themselves against *Abatwa*, and other lineages.

In differentiated societies, the oppressed peasants were informed and guided by Nyabingi to struggle against the ruling class. Peasants’ belief in Nyabingi became instrumental for their defence against the wrath and potency of other religions and lineages. Nyabingi gradually permeated deep to household levels. Oppressed sections saw solutions to most of their problems in Nyabingi. Nyabingi gradually became important in being invoked to seal and oversee certain sensitive agreements, social practices and promises.

The second phase of Nyabingi spanned from 1909-1914. Then, peasants were faced with the new invaders. They realised the dangers of the invasion, and the immediate solution was a call to action.
Nyabingi religion was very dynamic, and more abagirwa sprang up to replace the separated leadership, and broaden the struggle. This situation, which demanded prompt action, undermined certain rituals and initiations like okutweija. Recruitment was mainly based on nationalities, lineages, and groups: abagirwa, lineage leaders, elders, and so on, played an important role in the recruitment of membership into the movement. Then, voluntary joining of peasants into the membership was still limited. And a leader joined the movement with all those under him. Even lineages and peoples who had earlier refused to accept Nyabingi religion came to believe in it as all their other religions were silent about the solution to this crisis.

The other religions were limited to a much more individual level, and lacked a united mass of worshippers and a revolutionary programme. Their main weakness stemmed from the absence of spiritual leaders like abagirwa. As different sections of society saw the military option as vital, they accepted Nyabingi’s leadership and joined the struggle.

It was during this period that women came to the front and played an active role in leadership and combat. Seeing the various challenges and internal opposition, some abagirwa transformed into Nyabingi personifications. This phase was marked by spontaneous, sporadic insurgencies. The minimal organisation of peasants was mobilised into a sustained, coherent struggle. The peasants were still rooted into the ground like their crops the leadership had not developed the capacity, skills and focus to create and sustain a struggle for a long time. People still struggled within their environment, in a circumscribed area.

The two major differences between these struggles and the pre-colonial ones lay in the fact that women formed the bulk of the leadership and the principal enemy was from outside, and visible. However, they did not understand concretely the basis of the invading forces, their military strength, and the need to make a more comprehensive military planning, organisation; to forge a broader unity among various enganda so as to resist at the same time, and so on. Another objective weakness arose from the divisions between enganda. The pre-colonial divisions were based on past antagonisms. This blocked any possibilities for their unity. So, the first struggles were fragmented, spontaneous and short-lived.

The third phase began with the First World War of 1914-1919. Then, the Nyabingi Movement reached its climax. Not only did its membership increase numerically but it also developed qualitatively. There was a marked change in the recruitment process. A new leadership emerged, which was versed with the enemy and his methods of war, knew the enemy’s strengths and weaknesses,
and so on. Most of this leadership arose from the colonial services or from deportations and detentions. That gave them the opportunity to understand their military weaknesses and the need to acquire, incorporate, master, and use the enemy’s methods of war and weaponry. They also acquired firearms and ammunition from the adversary.

The leadership had learnt and appreciated the need for mass organisation, intensive preparations and active involvement of the population into the struggle. Their stay in the enemy’s camp also enabled them to appreciate the need for mobility and the importance of preserving the fighting forces from annihilation. They changed tactics, from the former method of direct charge to guerrilla warfare. They created and sustained armed struggle for years with mobile guerrilla forces.

Recruitment of the membership also underwent some qualitative change, especially from its massive, spontaneous forms. In some cases, recruitment was now based on willingness, ability and military skills.

There was intensive conscientisation and preparation. The leadership adopted more secretive methods, introduced important cultural practices that could help to unite the movement. They trained the membership in the mechanics of attack and self-defence, mobility and concealment in the rear-bases, and among the peasants, and so on. This was re-emphasised by colonial attacks, joint-military expeditions and screening. Counter-insurgency helped to sever the resisters’ roots from the agricultural rhythm.

The fourth phase was in the 1920-1930s. Then, the Nyabingi Movement was undermined by various factors. These included constant defeats, the deaths of the strong leadership - Ndochibiri, Ruhemba, and so on whom the resisters and the peasants took to be immortal. This was worsened by the adversary’s counter-insurgency, reprisals and raids. The various reforms and programmes that the colonialist initiated to undermine and defeat Nyabingi, the continued repression and witch-hunt for Nyabingi supporters and so on, had a great impact on the resisters. Coupled with this was the availability of other alternatives to Nyabingi religion - namely Christianity and Islam. Peasants begin to appeal to the state, and to use the colonial legal machinery against the state and its related institutions.

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30 This is a variant of the name Ndohchibiri. It was spelt differently by colonialists as Ndohchibiri, Ndohchimibiri, Knochibilillis, Ndochí-bíri, Ndöchí-mbíri, Ndochimbili, Ndöchi-mbili, Ndöchikembiri, Ntochibiri, Ndöcki-mbili, N’döcki-bíli and Bichubirenga (the clouds that are disappearing). All these misspellings by colonialists demonstrate the formidable resistance that he led and how it made the colonialist reached extreme levels of desperation.
New Survival Strategies: The Evolving of Dual Religio-Political Body politics

By the late 1930s, the Nyabingi Movement had been undermined. Through defeats, public addresses, lies, threats, opportunism and/or peasant rationality, and so on, many peasants opted to join the new religions. They began active participation in these new religions and by late 1930s, women led another religious movement: Revivalism (Ruvaivuro).

The Revivalist Movement, adopted the new religion instead of Nyabingi or any other old religion. This was a great achievement for colonialism as it became easy to control the peasants. To pre-empt the movement, the colonialists approached the CMS. The latter confirmed that it was ‘in full control of the enthusiasts’. It promised the state ‘to impress on their followers the necessity for obedience to civil authority on all forms’. It was in this light that Dr. Church promised to take disciplinary action in any case of insubordination.

After an interview with Archdeacon Pitts and Dr. Church, the DC left the CMS with the duty to control the Revivalist Movement. The DC instructed the chiefs that they had tribal powers to ensure the obedience of women to their legal guardians, and to control unruly gatherings (op. cit.) This was very instructive. The DC meant that the colonial government had transferred to chiefs legal and political powers over women. Mamdani correctly captured this as decentralised despotism (Mamdani; 1996).

However, Christianity failed to provide solutions to the key socio-economic, health and political issues in the subsequent years. Therefore, a religious movement, known as Mukaaka emerged in 1970s and attracted a cross-section of society. Its origins and development can be traced to the economic, social and political crises of the time and the mounting dictatorship in the 1970s.

In the face of the mounting socio-political and economic crises, Mukaaka gave way to another movement known as Abarangi. Its leadership was predominantly composed of females. Obviously, although the Nyabingi Movement was defeated, it was never wiped out.

The new movement incorporated some aspects of Christianity with some traditional and Nyabingi aspects. However, they were paid money. After pretences to commune with the supernatural force, omurangi offered medicine and advice to the client. Abarangi attended to all types of socio-economic, psychological and supernatural issues.
The established churches were threatened by Abarangi Movement and preached vehemently against it. *Abarangi* attracted more people from the other religions. So, they accumulated wealth much more easily and quicker than the pre-colonial *abagirwa*.

Although the Nyabingi and Abarangi were not linked in any way, there were some similarities between them. This is evident in the problems they addressed, their composition in terms of gender, their extraction of the surplus value from the peasants and the accumulation process. The rise of the new religious movement and its popularity lay in the economic hardships arising partly from exploitation, corruption, inflation, landlessness, diminishing yields, the impact of anti-people programmes and advice of IMF and World Bank, especially SAPs. There was deepening misery. The peasants did not understand scientifically what had gone wrong, and, therefore, resorted to the new, exploitative religious movements. Abarangi institution thrived on people’s misery and destitution.