The Role of Women in Anti-Colonial Struggles

‘Witchdoctors (females) have been a source of great trouble to the native administration of the Kigezi District for years by inciting the natives to disobey the chiefs and leading armed forces against authority ... If Kanzanyira returns to Kigezi District for the next three years, her influence is likely to cause a recrudescence of such armed revolt’.

The Nyabingi Movement was neither constituted by one gender, nor by one generation. This chapter attempts to locate the females in this movement. It examines how the Nyabingi Movement addressed the issues of gender and of outsiders in leadership and membership. It seeks explanations for the activeness and staunchness of many women in Nyabingi’s service at all levels both prior to the invasion and during these new struggles. It explores the internal reforms which were demanded and which ones were initiated during and after these struggles, and their consequences.

As mentioned earlier on, women were very instrumental in the leadership of the Nyabingi Movement. This was mainly because of their leadership role in Nyabingi religion. Women took an active role in military adventures. This chapter deals briefly with their role in this movement, and factors that facilitated them to play this crucial role and their limitations.
The prohibition of women from owning weapons and active participation in war was premised on the argument that women were weak, lacked experience in wars, and had their specified roles. A more plausible explanation seems to have lain in the question of whether men were ready to allow ownership of weapons to all sections of society. Could such a process have facilitated these other sections of society to resist men’s domination and oppression or the whole arrangement was symbolic - to preserve the status of men as heads of households? This calls for revisiting the restrictions of women and children to go to forges, let alone touching the raw materials like charcoal. This, therefore, meant that the oppressed sections of society had to be protected from any external aggression. Monopolising the protective role had the effect of legitimising the oppressive position of men, their magnanimity, infallibility and indispensability in society.

However, this did not mean that these other sections of society did not contribute to the defence of their society. Field research shows how women and children equipped men with stones during these fights and threw stones at the enemy while shielding themselves with winnowing trays (*entaara*). Women used their staves (*emihunda*) to stab their enemies. In case of attacks, women and children could use men’s weapons for self-defence. This was not directly condemned by the lineage elders as they would be defending themselves and their *enganda* from external aggression. In such instances, there would be no condemnation and no purification rites. Any defeat or victory affected all people, their economy and social set-up. In other cases, they would poison the enemy or make them drunk and then kill them with daggers (*endiga*) or other weapons. This did not apply to *Abatwa* ethnic grouping, where all sections of society had their instruments of production which were at the same time, weapons.

It was through the Nyabingi Movement and such charismatic leadership that a spirit of comradeship developed. This had the effect of sealing together various peoples in the struggle. All other practices and cultural initiations contributed to this. Another development was that women in leadership discussed with men on equal basis and commanded all membership in the fight. Combatants had realised that the issue at stake was to combine efforts of all members of society to defeat the invaders. As such, every contribution was welcomed. The role of *abagirwa* was also critical in the treatment of injuries sustained in the struggle. It was *abagirwa’s* role to invoke Nyabingi to threaten with curses and death penalty or actually arrange the deaths of the saboteurs.

The peasants who did not take up arms to resist gave logistical support in food and arms supplies, transport, scouting, intelligence, keeping secrets,
making arrangements, guiding and directing resisters in movement, transmitting information, hiding the resisters and confusing the enemy, recruitment, morale-boosting and encouragement, harassment of collaborators, and so on. All these contributions were critical in sustaining and promoting the struggle.

The Kivu Mission and the Boundary Commission were confronted militarily by peasant resisters. The first two main anti-colonial resistances were led by Muhumuza and Kaigirirwa. Muhumuza, mother of Ndungusi, was widow to the former King Rwabugiri of Rwanda. On her husband’s death, both Muhumuza and Ndungusi got involved in power struggles against Musinga. Musinga got the backing of colonialists and took the reins of power. These events and the subsequent ones forced Muhumuza and her son to flee to Rutobo, which was soon to be made the border between the new Ankore and Kigezi Districts. So, they joined peasant life and developed new relations with these peasants after falling from the ruling class in Rwanda. Also, Kaigirirwa came from the peasantry and was omugirwa of Nyabingi.

What is worth noting here is that while female abagirwa like Kaigirirwa were selected into the service of Nyabingi in their girlhood, got initiated into Nyabingi secrets and rites, and so on, and had more religious faith in Nyabingi religion, Muhumuza and her son adopted this religion, after leaving the palace. Their choice of Nyabingi religion was a conscious one, unlike other abagirwa. Nyabingi religion, became a powerful ideology for mother and son to gain legitimacy and credibility among peasants. Like other abagirwa, Nyabingi religion was important for them to extract surplus from the peasants through okutweija and okuterekyerera to Nyabingi and to declare war.

Owing to their historical origin, Muhumuza and her son were more conscious politically, ideologically and militarily than these peasants. Furthermore, they had encountered German colonialists and European missionaries in Rwanda. Both son and mother had no illusions about colonialism. In addition to that, they had been beneficiaries of the Rwanda state and understood the need to defend land and independence.

It is no wonder, therefore, that her struggles against Germans led to her capture and deportation to German East Africa (GEA). However, she struggled and managed to return soon after. This was also the time when other abagirwa were mobilising peasants into resistance against colonial invasion in the whole region. These resistances led to massacres and Kaigirirwa’s deportation to Mbarara. The absurd encounters of abagirwa, like Muhumuza, with colonial forces in Rwanda and GEA and Kaigirirwa with British forces while in detention at Mbarara were
very important for their future military and organisational purposes. These provided them with insight into the mechanics of the enemy, the need to resist and methods to accomplish it. Colonialism had set the terms.

The deportation of the leader did not cause them to disband. Instead, they became more determined to emancipate their society. They learnt more about the adversaries: their ways of life, their motives, methods of struggle and strengths, weaponry, military tactics, and protection from the weapons. They learnt the importance of mobility, retreat, broader unity, the role of the masses in self-emancipation, the need to study both the enemy and their members with a view to choose capable and dependable ones into leadership positions to keep the struggle going, as well as the need to conscientise the members. In fact, the separation was very important to the leadership. For instance, Muhumuza’s separation from the ruling class in Rwanda and then from the peasants to GEA helped to cut her ties to the aristocracy.

In a similar manner, Kaigirirwa’s deportation to Mbarara was a time of reflection. It helped to cut her roots from the geographical and social environment. It was this weakness which had led to the heavy losses and massacres.

Peasants would hide in swamps, bushes, caves and rocks in their geographical environment and be besieged by the colonial forces for weeks. Faced by hunger or misjudging that the enemy had left, they would fall easy prey to the enemy while trying to return. Their main problem was that they had not known that the new adversaries were skilled professional fighters. This was evident in the Nyakishenyi resistance. The colonial officer reported how a large number of rebels had become tired of hiding in the swamps and had tendered their submission, while others were following suit daily.

It was thus a time for gaining a rich experience for the forthcoming struggles, in which they were to apply most of this knowledge and skills. It also helped them meet many other oppressed people from other areas. This gave them opportunity to share their experiences about their new enemy and the need to fight to final victory. All these developments became the bases for their charismatic and forward-looking leadership in the struggles that they led thereafter. And their religious and political leadership roles made them the conscience of society.

Inauguration of the Nyabingi Movement

Muhumuza took the first initiative to mobilise peasants in the region against the invading forces. Her past rich experience enabled her to take the first initiative and mobilise peasants in the region into resistance. She was the first known woman
resister who mobilised a cross-section of peasants into armed resistance against colonialism in Kigezi. She took the initiative to sensitise the peasants about colonialism and its dangers. This was proved practically at Rutobo. There, she intercepted a convoy of White Fathers destined for Mulera. After interrogating their porters, she denied them food and passage (1911 BCR).

In the same area, these peasants resisted the Boundary Commission from carrying out demarcations. They disrupted the border demarcation exercise, uprooted border pillars, attacked the commissioners and occupied some of their camps. The Commissioners were compelled to step up security and move under tight protection.

The peasant resisters attacked all those in colonial service. These included mail runners and messengers. Although the colonial forces hit back - leading to deaths and injuries, the peasant resisters maintained their stand. The state attributed all these to Muhumuza’s political work (idem).

**Preparations for the War**

As already noted, the major problems for the natives arose from the low level of productive forces and absence of an organised armed force to engage and repel the invaders. There was no established institution to mobilise peasants for self-defence. The only way was through collective armed resistance.

It was in these circumstances that Muhumuza assumed leadership and mobilised peasants into armed resistance against colonialism. Knowing the weaknesses of peasants in relation to religions and witchcraft, she exploited the situation by promising them the protection of Nyabingi. She used Nyabingi religion for ideological purposes to unite and encourage them. She applied a militaristic approach to whoever refused to join the resistance. This way, she was able to raise a big force composed of various ethnicities and lineages. Some of these were formerly hostile to one another. Through her politics and invocations to Nyabingi, she was able to convince many peasants into unity against the common enemy. She showed them that the only way to defend their land and interests was through collective armed struggle.

Aware of the dangers of guns, she encouraged the resisters that she would render the European guns harmless by turning them into water. These were some of the promises that the subsequent leadership was to uphold and modify. Muhumuza was also able to incorporate lineage leaders and other influential personalities into the leadership. This had the advantage of bringing in various
peoples under such lineage leaders into the movement, even if they had not initially accepted Nyabingi religion.

She tried to rid the area of all those who formed the internal enemies of the struggle. She had no patience with this category of people. To this cause, she sharpened and carried three stakes for staking alive Mutambuka, Rwagara and Basajjabalaba, ‘who had brought the British into the region’.

Though she was able to mobilise a large peasant force, her militaristic approach to individuals, lineages and peoples that refused or hesitated to join the movement led to negative consequences. By attacking them and looting their livestock, they alienated many of them and forced them to join the enemy forces. This was detrimental to the movement as it swelled the enemy’s forces. In isolating and attacking them before attacking the principal enemy - colonialism - this peasant movement lost a credible force. The force could have been neutralised through dialogue, diplomacy, and other methods. This would have led to fewer isolated enemies. Yet, thousands of armed peasants under Rwagara and Mutambuka joined the colonial forces after being beaten by the resistance forces. Cap. Reid wrote to Maj. Jack in August 1911 that the situation was getting worse:

Mumusa was preaching an anti-European Crusade and collecting a considerable following in Rukiga, Mumusa or Muhumusa is a well-known personage in Ruanda, and has formerly given a great deal of trouble to the Germans. She is one of the ‘witch-doctors’ who are found in this part of Africa, and who are regarded with superstitious reverence by the native. Mumusa at one time had enormous power and still has (idem).

Given the struggles that she had organised and waged against the German colonialists in the German East Africa, the German colonialists also pledged military cooperation against the movement.

The leaders after Muhumuza tried to overcome this limitation. The leadership that emerged later tried to involve more people into the movement. We find that both the leadership and membership of the Nyakishenyi resistance were composed of both peasants and local people, who had been in colonial service as chiefs, askaris, messengers and porters.

The new approach had advantages. It weakened colonial forces at the time of the armed struggle, as many of its local chiefs defected to the Nyabingi Movement. It also increased the resisters’ morale, courage and inspiration in the
resistance. As the chiefs came with their followers, the colonial numbers reduced, augmenting the ranks of the resisters with experienced, hardened fighters.

Realising that some members were likely to lose faith in the leadership and desert the struggle or defect to the enemy or even turn against the leadership, Muhumuza drew lessons from the characteristics that people attributed to Nyabingi. One of these was to transform herself into a Nyabingi personification.

She was leading a big peasant force of various ethnicities and lineages. And she was not blind to the fact that some of them were likely to challenge her military plans and legitimacy to lead men to war. Even some of her membership had been allies or friends of Mutambuka and Rwagara. This, then, called for the creation of a solid ideology, which would unite them, and keep them, under indirect fear, from rebelling or questioning her legitimacy or refusing to carry out orders. People needed to be convinced that her line of action was the correct one as it was the Nyabingi line. She was able to marshal all these by combining her knowledge from the palace and that from the peasantry.

Other abagirwa were to capitalise on Nyabingi personification in the subsequent resistance. This was still prevalent by 1928 as the colonial officer reported Nyabingi's subversion to state and church with the local personification, heavily concentrated in Ndorwa (KDAR 1928). Unlike the pre-colonial personification, the new form was precipitated by the needs of war.

This transformation into a Nyabingi personification scared those who would have betrayed the struggle. Here was Nyabingi, in human form, defending their interests. It elevated her above other members of society. It gave her more powers and legitimacy to act decisively and created room for manipulation and command. It also bestowed on her more powers to dictate and deal with individuals and situations promptly as she deemed fit, especially those with dissenting views, wavering behaviour, traitors, and so on. It legitimised her to compel people to resist colonialism and to wage war against anyone who refused to heed the call of Nyabingi. Her decisions were claimed to be the decisions of Nyabingi. It also became a basis for increased encouragement, bravery, unity and comradeship among the peasant resisters. It had the effect of restraining more people from withdrawing from the struggle. It increased the confidence of the membership in the leadership for both temporal and spiritual interests. The membership became more determined to fight when they saw her more resolute in her promises, actions, and her spiritual claims.

Her fears were not unfounded. Some of the elders despised and feared this initiative and leadership by a woman. While some felt that it was degrading to be
led by women to war, others felt that their position as men and leaders would be undermined if women led them to war. Others feared the consequences of such leadership and resistance after the battle. They envisaged a situation of turmoil - where women and children would disobey them. These would challenge the existing social relations. There were those who did not understand the gravity of the situation. Some resorted to outright collaboration with the enemy for wealth and power, while others decided to sit back and wait rather than join forces led by women. Even others refused to join them because their former enemies had joined them.

In response, the resisters decided to attack such people before attacking the principal enemy. This also forced the leadership to increase propaganda, ideology, thinking, planning, secrecy and ruthlessness with the weak, the wavering, the traitors and informers.

Another development which united the peasant resisters under her leadership was her broadening the leadership of the struggle to unite the former hostile lineages and incorporate them into one strong peasant force. Lineage leaders were part of the leadership.

The Course and Consequences of the War

As she was organising a major war against the British forces, the British forces defeated her forces in a surprise attack under Cap. Reid and Sebalijja jointly with peasant forces of Mutambuka and Rwagara on 28 September 1911. In this surprise attack, masses of armed peasants were massacred. The colonial forces had to use 66 guns, 1,680 bullets and one canon. Sebalijja put it melodramatically thus:

I opened fire on them and they fled towards Effendi Marijani. He opened fire and they fled towards Captain Reid... the battle was won and Muhumuza was captured... Many unknown Abakiga were killed in the battle... We set fire to all the houses. We buried about forty corpses in one deep grave... On our side, one man was mortally wounded, while trying to plunder a house... The Abakiga on our side doubted the utility of carrying enemy wounded on their heads. They killed them and threw them down and moved on (Sebalijja, op. cit.)

His account is inaccurate and full of self-praise. This can be shown by the length of the battle. It lasted for six and half hours, with losses on both sides. As the report showed, Dr. Marshall, of the Commission, had led a force to Kumba. Though he found the war over, there were a good many wounded and he did
most useful work in attending to the wounded colonial troops. He transferred the acute cases to Kamwezi (op. cit.)

Although he did not explain the causes of this war, Sebalijja recounted how the peasants, who had been shouting that they were going to turn guns into water, had been wiped out through a surprise attack. He reported that Abakiga collaborators killed many unknown peasants.

Ngorogoza (op. cit.) records a mass grave of 40 people while others were devoured by vultures. This constitutes a minute window into how the colonialists were violating people’s rights and international conventions over prisoners of war (Sebalijja, op. cit.) In his account, the peasant resisters had burnt Sebalijja’s camp and then fought Mutambuka. After the final battle, Reid gathered peasants and threatened them that Muhumuza actually meant turning bullets into her men’s blood not water.

The significance of this battle is that it was an inaugural battle for peasant armed resistance under Nyabingi. It should be noted that the first recorded resistance was in Mpororo Kingdom, led by King Makobore in 1899. He was arrested and fined in 1899 for allowing two trading caravans from GEA to be cut up (Sebalijja, op. cit.; Vide File: A6/17/1904: Annual Reports. General Report on WP 1904).

**British Strategy of Separating the Leadership from the Membership**

While Ndungusi and others managed to escape, Muhumuza was wounded, captured by the colonial forces, despatched to Mbarara and then deported to Mengo. There followed a hot pursuit of other members in the leadership. However, they could not catch them as they had escaped into the hills. Even peasants resisted Cap. Reid’s investigations about the resistance (Cap. Reid’s Report of 5 March 1912. op. cit.)

Her return was blocked as she was a military and political threat - ‘high priestess of revolutionary religious-political cult Nabingi’. The agents feared her political-religious powers and military attacks. Her return would mean loss of their newly acquired lucrative jobs with tributes, incomes, bribes and prestige. On her part, Muhumuza continued sending messages that she would soon return to chase away the Europeans (PCWP to CS on 4 October 1917).

Fearing that she would organise the resistance through messengers, the state denied her visitors from Kigezi. It also stopped Nyindo’s herdsboys from
contacting her while taking Nyindo’s cattle to Gulu (PCWP to CS on 16 July 1917. Vide File: Historical and Political Notes [West] 1941).

The PCWP’s memorandum of 1 May 1922, vide minute 28 in SMP 5409 asked about Muhumuza’s repatriation so as to relieve government of maintenance costs. The district and provincial administrations remained emphatic against her return until her death in 1944. The PCWP communicated this position to the CS on 25 May 1922 that the District Administration was opposed to the return of both Muhumuza and Nyinabatwa. The KDAR 1932 noted that Muhumuza was receiving presents from her people.

This colonial strategy of separating the leadership from the membership had some basis. The state had realised that the return of such a deportee would be taken as testimony of Nyabingi’s triumph over the state. The 1926 incident confirmed the fears when abagirwa mobilised peasants on the theme that Muhumuza was returning. Hundreds of ‘people came from all parts voluntarily to build a large fence in an area 200 yards by 200 yards... to welcome her back as queen of Nyabingi since her ‘Nyabingi’ had obviously overcome everything causing her return to the district - even though she had been exiled for the last fifteen years!’ (op. cit.)

What threatened colonialism most was that not a chief reported it but a Roman Catholic Father. Obviously, the colonial agents feared Nyabingi, and the peasants’ wrath and vengeance.

Despite objections to her request for visitors, the peasants devised methods of visiting her secretly in Kampala for initiation into Nyabingi institution and its secrets and took her presents and tributes (op. cit.). This made the state more vigilant against the Nyabingi Movement.

The Buganda Resident, who went to Rwanda on this mission in 1939, discovered that the Nyabingi Movement was still active. The colonialists were shocked to learn that many people from Kigezi, Rwanda, Congo and Ankore came regularly to Muhumuza for initiation.56 They, therefore, took strict steps to stop these missions.

All these prove the effectiveness of this weapon of separating the leadership from the membership. Had she been in Kigezi, then, it would have been easier for her to effect a better organised resistance as Kaigirirwa was later to do.

This dismisses the narrow view presented by the colonialists that Muhumuza was just fighting to establish herself as ruler. Even this official view had

56 Memo of the Buganda Resident Commissioner to CS on 14 April 1939 and his report on Ruanda dated 13 April 1939.
changed by 1941 to the view that her special aim was to form a kingdom for her son Ndungusi (*op. cit.*). The problem with such presentation is that the resister is projected as using peasants to fight and die for her personal interests. This fails to show what popular interests were being advanced, the progressive nature of such a struggle and its achievements.

**Women in Leadership Post-Muhumuza**

There were many *abagirwa*, whose role in leadership and struggle led to their death, capture and deportation. Others had to disappear among the peasants. The Nyabingi Movement proved a military and political challenge to colonialism.

Muhumuza’s deportation was not the end of the movement. In fact, that was the launching of the Nyabingi Movement. Colonial authorities were soon to lament that ‘the female witches of the Mamusa type’ were at work in the whole district, mobilising people with ‘anti-European ideas’. It was not long before colonialism learnt the charismatic and effective character of these women - *abagirwa*, their political and mobilisation capacity, their capacity to provide leadership, ideology, interpretation of phenomena for people’s cause, and so on. It responded by intensifying repression, applied all ruthlessness it could marshal to hunt them down. Among those killed was Wahire. Chandungusi was captured and deported to Mbarara. She died on her way back. She was the mother of Katuregye (KDAR 1914-15. Vide Reports of WP of August and September, 1914). Mukeiganira was arrested, deported and her cattle seized. Nyinabatwa and Kanzanyira were also arrested and deported.

**The Court Subjugation Strategy**

Both Nyinabatwa and Kanzanyira were arrested and charged like the rest under Section 2 WC Ord. 1912. Nyinabatwa was charged under Criminal Case No. 56 of 1917 while Kanzanyira was charged under Criminal Case No. 6 of 1918.\(^{58}\) Judgment was based on D.C’s oaths and evidence. The Colonial Court deemed it imperative to deport each of them to a place more than 250 miles away as ‘witchdoctors (females) have been a source of great trouble to the native administration of the Kigezi District for years by inciting the natives to disobey the chiefs and leading armed forces against authority... If Kanzanyira returns

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\(^{57}\) The name Nyinabatwa was variably written by the colonialists as Ninabatwa.

to Kigezi District for the next three years, her influence is likely to cause a recrudescence of such armed revolt’. DC Gervoise swore to this Affidavit at Jinja on 31 March 1919. Nyinabatwa had been convicted on 6 December 1917.59

Colonial administration applied its modus operandi of setting up administrative and legal barriers to block their return to the membership. The state decided that they were not to return until conditions became more settled and the authority of the chiefs was less likely to be undermined by such perverse persons.60 It is not surprising that this separation also became their tragedy. Kanzanyira died on 28 July 1919 at Entebbe, a few days after arriving in deportation. Nyinabatwa died on 23 March 1923 at Mengo. Available records and correspondences reveal that both died of neglect, hardship and cruelty by the colonial authorities (op. cit.).

The intensity of colonial repression to the resisters forced the leadership to change tactics and operate among the people with utmost secrecy. For some time, the state retained maximum repression to suppress the ‘fanatical witch movements... essentially anti-European and need to be put down with a firm hand’ (KDAR 1915-16). It was forced to post a wardress at Kabale because of ‘increased number of female prisoners, chiefly Nabingi offenders’ (KDAR 1921). The leadership was forced to change their methods of mobilisation and struggle. They increased secrecy of movement, plans and operation, and thus broadened their work. More abagirwa sprung up and intensified their work with zeal. They travelled to other places to conscientise the oppressed peoples into resistance despite the intensifying repression.

New languages developed in form of Orupikya, which was a product of mixing syllables and twisting words and ideas to produce new meanings. Others included parables and allegories. Resisters also utilised the pre-colonial art of speech to communicate certain secrets without being understood by the enemy. The colonialists concluded that this was a Nyabingi language. They were also forced to expand their geographical terrain to Masaka and Karagwe. The colonial state arrested omugirwa in Masaka, charging her with ‘her disturbing and pernicious influence over the more ignorant natives’. She was deported. Another was ‘deported from Bgugi to Usumbura for dangerous propaganda’. It captured

59 DC to PCWP on 9 January 1919 and PC’s reply on 27 January 1919. Also see their Deportation Orders in the same files.

60 Governor to Secretary of State for Colonies on 2 September 1919. Also see excerpt from PCWP’s memorandum of 1 May 1922 Vide Minute 28 in SMP 5409. Also see his communication to the CS of 25 May 1922.
another one in Karagwe, and burnt all her appliances with the exception of her specially designed spears. It then convicted her on a number of charges.\textsuperscript{61}

One of the limitations of these \textit{abagirwa} was their failure to delineate clearly the objective and subjective conditions within the new areas. Although they raised pertinent issues of foreign occupation, impositions, demands and restrictions, the people in these areas responded differently to their call. Nyabingi religion lacked a historical and social base in the new areas. Yet, the subjective factor was very critical. So, the people's response in these new places tended to be slow and lukewarm to \textit{abagirwa}'s gospel of resistance. It should also be mentioned that some peasants had lived relatively peaceful lives, and were not ready to accept anything that could create more trouble for them.

In places like Masaka, Nyabingi religion and its \textit{abagirwa} were newer than colonialism. Worse still, this area had been under the Buganda state. It had been subjected to various forms of state exploitation prior to colonialism. As such, these appeals by \textit{abagirwa} could not be accepted so easily. It required time to gain legitimacy and social acceptance in these societies.

The state was vigilant and denied them the chance. However, it was clear that the peasants had great fear of both Nyabingi and its \textit{abagirwa}. The colonial officer recounted the impact of one \textit{omugirwa} on the peasant public in Bukoba:

\begin{quote}
During the course of the Baraza at Bagene it was interesting to note the effect she produced on the assembled natives. The chiefs, with scarcely any exception, trembled whenever her look was directed towards them. She also made most noticeable efforts to exercise some form of hypnotism over me (\textit{op. cit.}).
\end{quote}

\textbf{Kaigirirwa's Leadership of the Movement}

On their part, both Kaigirirwa and her husband Ruhemba underwent serious transformation during their separate deportations. Ruhemba had been deported in 1912 for his role in the movement. On his return, he was put under the supervision of Nyakishenyi's agent. This gave him advantage to monitor their activities and spy on them. It enabled him to learn their weak points and then choose appropriate methods for the attack, the timing, and so on. Even more so, his resolve was concretised by the murder of his brother by an \textit{askari}. It must be understood that neither of the two \textit{abagirwa} compelled the other to join the movement. It was their religious and political roles that led them to this leadership.

While Kaigirirwa’s initial methods of struggle were not very much different from those of other members like Muhumuza, she underwent a major transformation during her deportation. She was able to learn the importance of training, preparation, and sophistication; the necessity to keep away from the enemy so as to preserve the forces while tiring the enemy; the importance of avoiding to fight on the enemy’s terms; and the importance of hitting the enemy by surprise and at its weakest point.

It should be noted that the conditions and methods of struggle had changed from those prior to the 1914 war. Before that war, the leadership had been predominantly from the peasantry, with little or no wide experience. Peasant resisters were still rooted in the habitat like their crops. (This excepts Muhumuza.) Even the objectives of the struggle had changed. It should be recalled that PC had reported in 1912-13 that the natives, who had been recently in a state of semi-rebellion had become peaceful and were cultivating their crops and that ‘the clans who a month or two ago were defying the government have submitted and are similarly employed’ (WPAR 1912-13).

The first struggle that Kaigirirwa headed, after her return, was the Nyakishenyi resistance in 1917. The leadership for this resistance was broadened and included four women *abagirwa*, Ruhemba, seventeen chiefs and other influential personalities. Colonial reports show that this plan was made three months before the actual day and was kept a top secret. It is important to note that she, with others in leadership, studied the whole colonial situation in the area; understood its weaknesses and those of its local allies. They understood the need for broader alliances of peasants and those in colonial service. This was done by first identifying the conflicts between the colonial state, its Baganda agents and the local chiefs, and then exploiting them. These chiefs had grievances against the state. The local chiefs were marginalised in their own country by both the British and the Baganda agents. This included discrimination from ranks, status, income, and so on. The local chiefs could not benefit like their Baganda counterparts through accumulation of wealth from tax rebates, court dues, corrupt practices, and so on. They were excluded from all these. Kaigirirwa was able to exploit the situation to mobilise these chiefs.

The strength of the leadership was its capacity to understand the social grievances of different sections of society and then incorporate them into its programme. Among these was the hated taxation, forced labour, in form of *Ruharo, Kashanju*, head porterage, and so on. Others included abuse of office and direct abuses, corporal punishments and other arbitrary decisions.
and punishments, land alienation, forced contributions, and so on. The female *abagirwa* identified with men on these social grievances. Other social grievances arose from the rampant corruption, oppression, unfair court judgment, witch-hunting of Nyabingi followers and imposition of both British demands and Baganda language and norms onto the peasants. This was worsened by unfair court proceedings, heavy fines, denying peasants services and court judgment because they were incapable of speaking Luganda, and unfair land cases. These grievances had the effect of raising the peasants’ sentiments for nationalism.

Even chiefs, like Kisyagari and Ruzindana, who later betrayed the resistance at the critical time could not leak out the secret before that time. This was because, they had initially believed in the explanations and plans given by *abagirwa*. They, too, had suffered the naked oppression and discrimination in the system for political and economic resources. Furthermore, they feared the wrath of Nyabingi and its *abagirwa*, and of the people. They also realised that even if they had succeeded in betraying them and the colonialists pre-empted this resistance, they would be wiped out through revenge. However, they failed to marry theory and practice.

*Abagirwa* bound together all these resisters with an oath of secrecy and commitment under Nyabingi, and offered a solid ideology for the struggle. All this was accomplished secretly and selectively. The state conceded that, ‘No suspicion however of even disaffection or unrest leaked out until one daybreak when the massacre began though the victims had connections in peasantry through birth, marriages, blood brotherhood, and so on. Nyabingi enforced among them discipline, unity, courage, determination, confidence and comradeship. The leadership carried out secret organisation among Nyakishenyi peasants for self-emancipation under its guidance and protection. It was through this capable leadership and high level of organisation with a solid programme, that they mobilised over 1,400 armed peasants into the armed struggle. This occurred on 12 August 1917 at around 6.30 a.m. when they attacked all in the service of colonialism and destroyed all the symbols of colonial oppression and exploitation.

According to reports, ‘hordes of Abakiga and Bahororo from the adjacent country... attacked the residence of Abdulla Mwanika... all his enclosures and houses were totally destroyed by fire, 64 dwelling houses of Baganda, Banyankole and loyal Abakiga were also burnt. The CMS and Moslem Mosque suffered similarly’. The agent’s life was saved by, ‘loyal Mukiga Chief Kisiagali and others with their people... 63 men, women and children were massacred by the
insurgents, 15 men, women and children were wounded, some severely. ...All lived near the agent and some of them were assisting him in his duties.’

Although all those people had wives, followers, or blood brothers among the local population, nothing ever leaked until the daybreak when the insurrection began. The insurgents seized 64 cattle and 330 goats from the agent and others. They looted or destroyed much property, including five Poll Tax Registers, Case Books of the Native court and Five Books of Poll Tax Tickets. The state was quick to learn that the resistance ‘was directly due to the machinations of witch doctor Kaigirirwa and possibly others with her due to superstitious influence of a native witch doctor who unfortunately succeeded in escaping. The ‘Nabingi’ cult has never failed to find a following in this district’. Colonial intelligence reports argued that ‘certain of the disloyal chiefs some months ago paid a visit to Ndochibiri, who is believed to have entrusted Kaigirirwa with the task of fomenting mischief in Nakishenyi’ (KDAR 1917-18).

It became clear that ‘...the rebellion was an attempt by a section of the residents in Nyakishenyi to free themselves from European rule, and to restore former conditions of independence; and absence of obligations, - in the shape of Poll Tax and Labour. Rebel opinion supported the belief that the overthrow of authority and the removal of the chiefs appointed by Government and the European officers was a task within their powers’ (idem). Abdulla testified that ‘five hordes of Abakiga’ shot at him and said, ‘We do not want you here. The Nyabingi has ordered us to kill you or drive you away’. The court evidence by Kasenene, a Nyakishenyi peasant resister shows some of the issues around which the peasants were mobilised, how they were mobilised, the theme of the struggle, and Nyabingi’s context:

Our Chiefs told us ‘we see you are tired of work we have made a plan to kill the Baganda and the Europeans, so that they may leave the country and we shall be independent as we were before. You will pay no more tax and we will serve Nyabingi who used to rule over us before’. When we heard what the chiefs said, we agreed, as we did not want to do any work, so we attacked Abdulla (Court evidence

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62 Communication from the Ag DC of 31 August 1917 on ‘Native Rising in Nyakishenyi’. Vide the PCWP’s telegraph to CS of 20 August 1917. Also see PCWP to the CS on 24 September1917 & C.S’ telegraph to PCWP of 12 October 1917 on the same issue. Report of the DM/DC to the Chief Justice on 8 September 1917. Report of the DM/DC to the Chief Magistrate of 8 September 1917; and the DC Kigezi to the PCWP on 26 June 1919.
Wavamuno, one of the agents that narrowly survived the onslaught testified that over 1,400 Bakiga peasants came shouting; ‘We have come to pay tax!’ They carried spears and other weapons in their hands instead of money (Court evidence by Wavamuno, forwarded by the DM/DC). This was a veiled statement of resistance to exploitation through an alien taxation system.

This testimony demonstrated that the colonised people were fed up with colonial exploitation in form of taxes. Given that the colonialists were far removed from the scene of exploitation and oppression, the peasants had to attack the representatives of colonialism. That was the object of indirect rule – using the proverbial omwiru rope to tether fellow abairu for the oppressors and exploiters.

The testimony further reflects the impact of Nyabingi on the followers. They did not only use it for struggle but also believed in it and worshipped it. The spears were not only symbols but actual weapons for resistance. Nyabingi religious philosophy inspired them against colonial power and its impositions including taxes, laws, alien chiefs, and so on. By that action the religious/ideological perceptions were influencing, albeit negatively, the economic policies of the colonial regime, which were represented by the taxation imposed and collected by the chiefs. That marked the interface between the religious clashes, represented by ‘modernity’ versus ‘traditionalism’. The former represented by the colonial government and its agents were pushing for taxation to sustain economic activities and, therefore, political base.

Cecil Rhodes’ quotation is very instructive. This so-called modernity imposed an alien capitalist set of exploitative technologies on peoples with different modes of existence. The courts were part of the colonial system. As such, the courts’ rulings, representing and protecting modernity had to impose mercilessly heavy punishments on whoever challenged the colonial order. This was the source of the legitimacy, mandate and the right of existence of these courts. Courts, therefore, had to facilitate colonialism instead of crippling it. It was on this basis that the Governor instructed the Attorney General to conduct these prosecutions. This was accomplished and all the accused were sentenced heavily.

In this particular legal scenario, three of the accused were convicted and sentenced to death through public hanging. Two were subsequently hanged in Kabale while the third was executed in Kampala.
Colonial Reactions to the Nyakishenyi Resistance

It should be understood that by 1917, the whole district was characterised by resistance through covert and overt methods. It is important to review briefly the peasant resistance that took place at Butare, four days before the Nyakishenyi resistance. Lwampomo, of Mukaranga, organised peasants into armed resistance. The actual resistance took place on 8 August 1917. They blocked passage of the agent Butale who was touring Mukaranga, attacked him and shot one of his followers. They forced him to retreat and chased him and his entourage. The DC had noted in April that Butare peasants were among the most truculent, who were averse to forced labour and any taxation (DC’s report on Kanyarwanda on 22 April 1917).

Faced with the Nyakishenyi resistance, the state was forced to shelve counter-insurgency for Butare until after resolving the major resistance in Nyakishenyi. This finally took place on 24 August 1917, when the DC and his team led a force of 20 policemen and other followers to Butare to crash it. The peasants ‘whereof fled at the first signs of approach, and hiding themselves in the swamps’. They captured peasants’ livestock which were treated as a Collective Political Fine. After two days, they were forced to retire after burning down all the peasants’ houses. Given this real threat to colonial power and its agents at Butare, the colonial authorities left behind four armed policemen to guard the agent and government property (Telegraph of Ag. DC to PCWP dated 20 August 1917 & letter of 31 August 1917 on ‘Attack on Agent, Butale’).

In response to the Nyakishenyi resistance, colonial forces from all over the district headed for Nyakishenyi. The forces from Kinkizi and Ikumba arrived early and saved Kisyagali’s village from destruction. Peasant resisters had attacked it as reprisal for his betrayal. The forces came with all force to smash the resistance, restore colonial law and order. It unleashed state terror, used arms against the resisters. ‘Energetic action was at once taken and the natives dispersed... a number of Bakiga were shot in action with the police and a considerable amount of stock captured’ (KDAR 1917-18).

In the five days of intensive counter-insurgency, over 100 peasants were killed, including three chiefs. They captured 479 cattle and 764 goats and sheep, recovered one Poll Tax Ticket book of the previous year and 2 Poll Tax Registers (op. cit.)
However, resisters fought back and the state was forced to confess that it was ‘impossible to arrest persons wanted owing to the armed resistance’ (DC to PCWP on 21 September 1917).

Peasant resistance intensified. Casualties in colonial forces included Dr. Webb, who was speared (DC writing to PCWP on 21 September 1917 about Native Rising in Nyakishenyi).

Agents and local allies played a significant role in this counter-insurgency. During this exercise, DC Ankore sealed off the border and patrolled it to net any rebels running into Ankore. The peasants crossed these borders, fleeing from state demands and repression (idem. Vide DC’s Report of 8 April 1912). That was the new colonial technology of power. Seven chiefs were still at large while seven chiefs had refused to join the peasant forces.

Colonial intelligence reports indicated that Kaigirirwa and her forces were operating near the Belgian frontier. The DC concluded his report that they ‘left Nakishenyi for Kabale 19th. the country having been restored to a peaceful condition’. The KDAR of 1917-1918 noted re-establishment of colonial order in Nyakishenyi.

In inviting the Chief Justice to the court trial in Kabale of the rebels, the Ag DC/DM underlined the need to create a frightening impression to the peasants:

This rebellion is a serious affair, and in its results the most deadly I have known, or heard of in this district. It seems to me to be an affair in which the trial of the principal prisoners by the High Court would be an eminently desirable feature; such a course would have a decided impression in the district (Vide KDAR 1917-18)

On 19 September 1917, the Ag Governor suggested that the Attorney General should conduct the prosecutions. This was aimed at inflicting fear into the peasants. So, while three rebels were executed, the rest had long term R.I.

It would be erroneous to argue that the resisters were only against Baganda agents for imposing their language and demands on them. They wanted the alien, oppressive, exploitative system to go. That was why they took away the Poll Tax Tickets, Tax Register records and case books, which symbolised the oppression and exploitation by the new system.

The looting of the livestock of the allies of the state was another testimony. In a region where livestock was sparsely distributed, on an average of 3-5 head of cattle per household, Agent Abdulla had accumulated 64 cattle and 330 goats
in five years. Agents were busy using the system for their economic gains. On the other hand, this counter-insurgency led to disastrous famines in the two following years. KDAR, 1917-1918 commended the great work by Agents: Stephani Musoke, Zambatisi Jute, Sowedi Sabadu, Zakaria Barake, Namunye and Sulimani. The names clearly suggest three things. First, all these agents were foreigners to this area. Secondly, they had been converted to the new religions – either Mohammedanism or Christianity. Thirdly, they were all men.

There are various reasons why different parties participated vigorously in the counter-insurgency. Colonialists wanted to smash the resistance before it spread in the whole area. They had to protect their political and economic interests. They had to punish the resisters and restore some order while also teaching them never to resist again. They also had to prove to their agents and local allies that they had a strong state which could smash any resistance, and protect them.

Similarly, Baganda agents had also to prove to their masters their ability to serve the system. They did not want to lose their lucrative, privileged positions by being replaced with new agents. They were beneficiaries of this colonial system and any threat to overthrow it threatened their interests. At the same time, they had some scores to settle with the peasant resisters who had murdered their relatives, friends, and so on.

Seen from a narrow perspective, it appeared as an ethnic conflict between Nyakishenyi peasants, Baganda and Banyankore. This was what the colonialists presented persistently in their communication and later capitalised on to reform the system.

Many people saw Baganda and other agents as their enemies. These included the small, local chiefs. These were rivals to the alien agents and wanted to take their positions. They had opted for collaboration earlier on for various reasons. They did it for material gains in form of rewards from looted property, jobs and promotions, and social status. There was also an element of ignorance, especially among the new converts and agents’ followers.

The DC handed over some livestock and other property to agents and collaborators, settled claims and he asked sanction to give out rewards to collaborators, compensate others and sell the surplus livestock. The most important point was his request ‘for the sanction to offer a reward of 20 head of cattle for the capture of the witch doctoress Kaigirwa alias Musige’. PCWP wrote to CS on 26 September 1917 about these issues and the CS sanctioned all these in his telegraph to PCWP on 12 October 1917.
This brutal suppression did not cow down the movement, as the PC hoped:
‘I trust there will be no further trouble of this sort amongst the Bakiga, who are a fine race but unfortunately intensely superstitious as regards the powers of the ‘Nyabingi’ and at certain seasons of year addicted to excessive beer drinking, which frequently leads to fighting among themselves’ (op. cit.).

Mutation of the Resistance

The role of Kaigirirwa did not end with the Nyakishenyi resistance. This was a step towards stronger and longer peasant guerrilla warfare under Ndochibiri and others. This new development cannot be attributed merely to the fear of colonial repression unleashed in Nyakishenyi or to the fear of the price on her head. It can be explained from their new programme for the movement; their patriotic objectives and impact of intensive repression on the peasants. It should be understood that peasants were not ready to betray her to the colonialists. The opportunists, who would have ventured to earn those cattle did not know her movements and programme. Even those who could have known, feared revenge and mysterious deaths.

However, the price on her head led to other consequences. Peasants became more vigilant to protect her. Others were forced to harden and join the struggle by her charisma, realising that a woman had threatened this colonial force. Her capacity to elude the enemy’s traps, intensification of militancy, organisation and determination, transformed her into a hardened, seasoned fighter, who, with other resisters shed all attachments to home or village life. They joined Ndochibiri’s guerrilla forces actively. It was her long experience in resistance and commitment, courage, military training, leadership qualities and charisma that brought her to top leadership after the tragic death of Ndochibiri and other three top leaders.

In pre-colonial times, she would have been expected to withdraw from all activities for days to mourn her husband and comrades. She would have had to wait quietly having been widowed and wait for one of her brothers-in-law to inherit her. Instead, this hardened her, made her more resolute to fight colonialism. However, it should be noted that it was impossible for her to mourn her husband, even if she had wanted, since she was on the run as colonial forces were pursuing her. Right from joining ranks with Ndochibiri, her programme of emancipation had extended beyond the colonial borders.

Kaigirirwa had distinguished herself in her capacity to organise peasants, inspire in them courage and lead them to war. Her capacity to understand
people’s grievances and problems went beyond gender limitations. Women began identifying with men’s cause, seeking appropriate solutions and implementing these solutions. Their capacity to study the whole situation, integrate themselves into it, then come out with correct solutions of self-emancipation through armed struggle and then carrying out the task of mobilising a cross-section of society into militant resistance was a testimony to their leadership role. This charismatic leadership inspired and united the combatants.

It was these *abagirwa* who purported to alleviate people’s burdens from colonialism and then change the order of things in their favour. They had the capacity to identify people’s rights and the methods to regain them, to unite with men leaders to plan struggles and convince local colonial agents to cross to the people’s side and fight for their popular rights. This forced the state to intensify brutality, witch-hunt them and impose deportation, executions, long, rigorous imprisonments, and prices on some of them.

Kaigirirwa, Ruhemba and others joined forces with Ndochibiri. In the struggles that ensued, Kaigirirwa played a key role in military training of the fighters, organisation and planning, spying and other intelligence network, and the actual struggle. She contributed a lot in training these peasant resisters in the use of lethal weapons, and so on. It is no wonder, therefore, to find that she was commanding a peasant force of over 600 fighters by 20 June 1919.

It is of interest that the deaths of Ndochibiri, Ruhemba, Rumuri et al. did not discourage her from the struggle but instead strengthened her into more resistance. She took on the new tasks of providing the fighters with arms and food; training; creating and strengthening friendship between the resisters and the peasants; creating more brotherhood; recruiting more combatants, and so on. The state hurried to change the site of the administration headquarters with a new *Boma* at Kabale, re-roofed the buildings with corrugated iron sheets since it was ‘fully alive to the fact that incendiarism on the part of fanatical followers of the late Ndochimbiri, the late Ruhemba and the still existing witch doctoress, Kaigirwa, is a real danger and not to be scoffed at’ (PCWP to OC Police on 7 July 1919).

She led an attack on the colonial forces within two weeks after her assumption of top leadership. She led another attack from the Kisalu area. This ‘was driven off by a Police Patrol in Nakishenyi-Kinkizi area and; ‘in retiring they announced that they would wait for vengeance until the Government relaxed their precautions
and forgot their presence.  

They waged other attacks in the subsequent period. It was in combat in 1921 that she was shot and killed, after twelve years of active anti-colonial struggles (op. cit.).

The other challenge to colonialism was that while all actors in its service were men, Nyabingi had both men and women in the membership and leadership, with women playing a dominant role in the leadership. The same applied to the new religions which came with it. Men dominated their ranks, both at home and in these colonies. Back in Europe, the European woman was discriminated against in public roles like the military, active politics, religions, and so on. Yet, here was a locally established religion dominated by militant women, addressing people’s spiritual, temporal, military, physiological and psychological needs. This complicated matters for the colonialists in terms of both armed struggle and justification.

Continued attacks and heavy losses in terms of personnel and expenditure forced colonialism to make certain reforms, aimed at removing some of the social grievances.

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63 PCWP’s Report of July, 1919. Ag CS to the Director of PWD Kigezi Station. File: Western Province, Kabale Station, Defence Precautions.