Contributions and Limitations of the Nyabingi Movement

Any unaccountable incident is put down to ‘Nyabingi’ and is at once seized upon by the witch doctor as a proof of his powers which all helps to foster any agitation he may have in mind. The recent dry weather causing the matama crop to begin to wilt of course lent colour to the general rumour that a new Sultan would arrive in the country in the place of Government and would bring ‘nyabingi’, new seed, rain, etc (op. cit.)

We shall find it extremely difficult to effect his capture since he is always informed of our slightest movements. He is held in terror by the native population by reason of his supernatural associations, and no one dares to denounce his gatherings from the additional fear of reprisals ... he seldom risks remaining in villages and takes the precaution of establishing his camps in places which are far from population and kept secret, these rendezvous even he changes frequently.

The Nyabingi Movement resisters were able to defeat colonial forces in some of these battles because of some advantages they had over the latter. These included numerical strength, commitment, methods of struggle and timing, knowledge of the terrain and its effective utilisation, people’s support and involvement, and so on. However, being masses, at a low level of production and with a narrower
outlook than their counterparts, they could not press home for more successes to final victory. Neither did many of them develop beyond mass resistance and create a regional, armed force to fight for their rights and defend their successes.

Many of them saw these wars in the same way as pre-colonial wars with other **enganda**, where the initial defeats meant final victory. Yet, the state attacked in succession with no attachment to production, no family responsibilities, no shortage of supplies, and so on. It did not first make war preparations which built up to climaxes through dances or beating drums. It did not even first challenge its enemies to fight as these peasants did. Its rules of the game were different and overwhelmed the resisters. So, the peasants’ military success were short-lived.

The peasants’ defeat arose out of their objective weaknesses. These included lack of organisation and broader unity of all peasants in the region to resist at the same time. They failed to neutralise collaborators, either politically or militarily. This excepts the Nyakishenyi resistance and the one under Ndochibiri. Most of them failed to learn and master the enemies’ military methods and weaknesses. This was worsened by their crude pre-capitalist weapons and military methods, which made them vulnerable to advanced capitalist ones. Stones and spears are no match to the repeated fire of self-loading machine guns. These measures contributed in undermining the Nyabingi Movement.

By the mid-1930s, Nyabingi resistance was declining, taking new forms such as avoidance of poll tax, forced labour or other obligations (KDARs 1933-38). The state had penetrated deep into the peasantry (idem). By 1939, the Nyabingi Movement had been weakened considerably (Buganda Resident to CS on 14 April 1939. Vide File: Historical and Political Notes [West] 1941).

Despite the eventual defeats, the armed violence had great impact. The natives knew that this was their collective responsibility. It helped them to patch up their conflicts and join forces for self-emancipation. Right from the beginning, the more they were beaten, the more resistances flared up. They did not surrender but were conquered militarily after bitter wars. However, successive defeats, massacres, tortures, imprisonments, public executions, deportations, and so on, demoralised the resisters. They came to terms with reality and learnt the invincibility of colonialism. They gradually began to use it from within and to appeal to the state for arbitration.

**Effect of Nyabingi Movement on Colonialism**

The state had learnt that militarism alone could not last long. It, therefore, resorted to political solutions, reformed its administration, made changes in its demands,
promoted some local institutions to undermine Nyabingi, reduced witch-hunts and punishments to the culprits. It changed its approach and policies and adopted a cautious approach in dealing with them.

Faced with the insurgency, the state was forced to import an anthropologist in the person of Mandelbaum to study the peasants and devise measures to control them. Gradually, it made peasants form councils up to village level in which they would discuss colonial policies and air their grievances. The new reforms were not outrightly hostile. On their part, the peasants, tired of continuous defeats, punishments and famines, wanted to settle down to production.

The state embarked on the programme of ‘re-construction and soothing a volcanic people by explaining or removing causes of potential upheavals rather than by initial punishment and by substituting, where possible, indigenes for aliens in the control of local affairs’ (op. cit.) It was also forced to shift its administration centre, first from Kigezi to Ikumba64 and then to Kabale. In 1919 alone, it had to spend more than a thousand pounds to change the Kabale Station. All these were from real fears of the Nyabingi Movement (File: 146: Native Administration: Nabingi and Kabale defence (1919-1923).

It gradually began to remove any grievance that would form a basis for peasant resistance. This included warding off missionaries from exploiting peasants in different ways under the blessing of the state. These malpractices revolved around taking away peasants’ resources such as land, labour, food and exposing them to diseases.

The state, however, made policies outlawing carrying spears and any other object, which could be used as a weapon. Secondly, it made policies against local smithing, and inflicted heavy penalties on anyone that violated this. Punishments included imprisonment and cutting of thumbs. This was worsened by forced labour, labour migration and massive importation of cheap manufactured goods. These undermined the local industry and tied the area to the new economic order. Yet, the new weapon of making war - the gun - was never available to the local population. And there were restrictions against free political organisation.

**Changing from an Insurgent Religion to a Revolutionary Movement**

It should be noted that in all these struggles, these resisters put their faith and protection in Nyabingi; even those households and lineages which Nyabingi

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64 The colonialists variably spelled Ikumba as Kumba.
religion had not permeated. Confronted by colonialism, peasants accepted that Nyabingi had sanctioned this struggle. Nyabingi was their leader and protector in this war. Nyabingi religion, therefore, transcended its spiritual roles to address peasants’ temporal needs. As such, the leadership of this resistance had to use Nyabingi religion, even if it might not have believed in it.

Resistance had to be given a solid faith to hold on to. This gave abagirwa a vital role in increasing the resisters’ faith and fear in Nyabingi, encouraging them to fight, threatening the waverers and the weak to become strong and fight. Nyabingi gained more legitimacy and expansion among the peasants and the area freely, without threat of internal opposition. It also helped in undermining the passive religions.

While some of them were pro-established orders, all of them offered no practical solution to secular, psychological and spiritual problems confronting peasants. With colonial invasion, these religions could not come up with any solution either. It was only abagirwa, who attended to these problems and offered some solutions and explanations.

At the time of invasion, Nyabingi confronted two enemies, the external and the internal. It became clear that while the main enemy was external, to confront him required internal reforms. Internal reforms were demanded both in the society and the Nyabingi institution. It was necessary to use instruments of violence and subordination to different sections of society regardless of gender, age, lineage, historical origin, and so on, and allow members to come into leadership and address issues of gender, minorities, among others. With colonialism as a new oppressor, various sections of society found the solution in the Nyabingi Movement. All were forced into anti-colonial struggles at various levels, in various forms. While some took to arms, others supported them with information, logistics, like coverage and shelter, arms, food, guidance and messages.

New Changes from the Anti-colonial Struggles

It was in these anti-colonial Nyabingi struggles that women took up a critical leadership role in armed struggles - not only as mediums of Nyabingi but as defenders of society; directing the fighters and participating fully in combat both in leadership and among fighters, planning, providing ideologies, encouraging fighters and administering invocations of secrecy under Nyabingi. In addition to holding local weapons, women held guns and taught other resisters how to use them. This was the first time that they stood with men in battle, fought side by side with men and died together. The active participation of women - both in
memberships and leadership - fostered an atmosphere of commitment, dedication and
comradeship among the resisters without any discrimination. This ensured
sustenance of the resistances.

This great leap from pre-colonial period demonstrated clearly that a solid,
long-lasting defence for society depended on all members of society, and that
in time of crisis, every member had something to contribute. This called for all
sections of society to defend it. In other words, defence for society could not
be based on gender differences but on all who lived in it. It showed that basing
on gender to determine defence of society spelled out peril since all sections of
society were needed in this struggle and that unity had to be built on equality and
comradeship rather than basing on inequality, oppression and discrimination. This
new development became the basis for the development, sustenance and longevity
of the Nyabingi Movement. Hence, the struggles that ensued gradually had shed
away spontaneity and developed into arduous, protracted, sharp struggles of
mobile peasant resisters.

While these internal reforms were made, they did not extend deep to household
level. In other words, they did not permeate the whole society, beyond the
immediate requirements of defence of society. Even those who did not engage
in resistance did not experience them. The same old hierarchy remained with
the colonial state on top. Such reforms, therefore, remained superficial, without
any profound effect on the existing relations.

Secondly, even these reforms were not long-lasting. After the military
encounter, the various sections of society resumed their social positions in
the existing framework. Meaningful, profound reforms would have to address
the existing social relations, address issues related to gender, youths and other
minorities. In this context, equality and comradeship was experienced only in
the battlefield. The narrowness of these reforms finally contributed to the defeat
of the Nyabingi Movement.

The natives did not incorporate the new ideas completely. While abagirwa
accepted sacrifices in monetary terms and applied foreign military technology
and science, they restricted their fold from accepting certain innovations being
preached by the state. A situation developed where abagirwa brought forward
explanations to counter any colonial move. The colonial state brought forth
counter-arguments in defence of such moves. These colonial explanations
were backed by coercion while those by Nyabingi were backed by fear of
the supernatural and the unknown consequences. Force, therefore, compelled
peasants to implement these programmes, against their will and the wishes of abagirwa.

However, as the colonial programmes produced positive results in conformity with what colonial authorities had earlier explained, the Nyabingi religion was undermined. In issues related to health, sanitation, production, soil protection, medicine and vaccines for people and cattle the state’s explanations and policies proved most successful and convincing.

The sacrifices to Nyabingi in form of alcohol, daughters and foodstuffs were gradually abandoned due to the dynamics of this war. Secondly, the long, pretentious process of selecting omugirwa was abandoned. With the new continuous struggles, it became clear that any rigidities or delays in leadership-formation, or initiative-taking spelled out peril for Nyabingi and the people. Nyabingi, therefore, became very flexible to the membership in joining its ranks. Since all abagirwa were busy mobilising peasants into resistance, and on constant run from colonial repression, there was no time for a systematic initiation of new abagirwa into Nyabingi secrets.

War conditions demanded continuity in leadership. Where one omugirwa got killed or arrested, another had to emerge promptly, take up her place and continue the struggle. As such, many more people became abagirwa and sustained the struggle.

That paralysed colonialism. The dynamic process had the advantage of bringing in different people with different leadership qualities, military skills and experience into leadership. Most of them would never have qualified in normal conditions to become abagirwa. Many of them were men, formerly in colonial service. Such would never have qualified to join its ranks due to gender bias and their former role in the colonial service. Most pre-colonial abagirwa were women. Yet, during these struggles, even personalities with royal origins like Muhumuza and Ndungusi became abagirwa. It was this new leadership that emerged after 1914; became instrumental in the resistances and led peasant resisters into long, protracted struggles. The new leadership had new skills and politics to teach them.

These events showed that even non-believers had something to contribute to save society and Nyabingi religion. It demonstrated that beliefs were not enough.
Effects of the Changes

The fluidity and flexibility into the ranks of Nyabingi led to its undermining. Many who replaced the old abagirwa had not undergone any initiation into the secrets and rituals of Nyabingi. Neither had they been chosen in the usual way. This hampered them from managing adequately the spiritual aspects and defending Nyabingi outside the resistance. They were not committed to the spiritual aspect like the initiated abagirwa. Their main object was to struggle, although they feared and revered Nyabingi. It was this type of leadership which came to understand some weaknesses of Nyabingi and either exploited them for personal gains or disorganised the movement. In colonial language, they became ‘charlatans masquerading as Nyabingi’.

Separation of leadership from the membership through death, imprisonment or disappearance did not wipe out the movement although it affected the course, magnitude and momentum of the resistance. This was because the Nyabingi Movement did not depend solely on individual leadership, which would have made it incapable of bringing up new leadership. New leadership always sprung up and led the struggle.

The limitation of this type of leadership was that it was handicapped by lack of experience, absence of prior records of the struggle and a consistent programme, strategies, lack of continuity, experience and lack of the capacity of the former leadership. These had negative consequences. It was also hard for the new leadership to know the connections in the enemies’ camp, all the codes used, their contacts, and so on. This gave the advantage to the state as it was organised, had records, with a systematic programme, and so on (KDAR 1928).

This explains why the death of Ndochibiri and his comrades was followed by the weakening of the resistance. Their attacks on British forces under Kaigirirwa’s leadership were easily defeated although they were well armed with 28 rifles. Worse still, they began showing other weaknesses to the enemy. One of them was when ‘they announced that they would wait for vengeance until the Government relaxed their precautions and forgot their presence’ (WP July Report).

While the dialectical process of Nyabingi was very important in sustaining the struggle, it also became a weakness. Before the emergence of the new leadership, peasants believed in religion so much that they failed to advance ahead to make longer, comprehensive planning against the enemy. Similarly, they did not study the situation after any defeat to learn from such experiences. This denied them
opportunity to understand the enemy and his skills, strength and weaknesses and the necessary internal reforms and planning before attacking.

Another critical point was of timing. The wholesale belief in the invincibility of Nyabingi contributed heavily to a series of defeats. While the process was very crucial and timely, with the effect of paralysing the enemy, still, it had weaknesses. It increased the death toll, arrests, mistakes, political fines, among others. This decreased the morale and forced peasants to re-think and re-assess the whole situation.

Continuous peasant attacks that resulted in humiliating defeats also contributed to the undermining of the struggle. There was no time to study the enemy’s resources, tactics, methods of struggle, strategies and weaknesses. They did not have time to make comprehensive reorganisation and modifications of strategies and arms. In many of the struggles, no attempts were made to capture or acquire the enemy’s weapons and master his skills so as to defeat him. Repeated defeats and massacres of peasants depleted them numerically and demoralised them. It also depleted their weapons and livestock while the enemy increased in strength and numbers.

Many peasants came to understand the invincibility of the enemy and the weaknesses of Nyabingi. Some came to recognise their weaknesses vis-à-vis the enemy and decided to withdraw from resistance, or to migrate across the borders while some resorted to other individual solutions like suicides, murders, joining the enemy forces, and so on. In other words, they began to withdraw their faith from Nyabingi as they could no longer continue dying for beliefs. Others began to understand the need for more and better organisation and preparation for a general mass resistance by all the peasants. Some resorted to sending their children to learn the enemy’s knowledge but objected to their conversion into new religions.

By the 1930s, many peasants had dropped the option of militant resistance and were joining the new religions. Others were being recommended to join the colonial ranks by missionaries and agents. In fact, the CMS had proposed in 1914 to the ADC, ‘to appoint only Protestants as chiefs in a certain district, a proposal which I was unable to accede to. I have yet to learn that Protestants make superior chiefs to those of other denominations.’ (Sullivan to MacDougall, ADC Kigezi on 13 March 1916).
Other Forms of Resistance

There were other various forms of peasant resistance, which were not under the Nyabingi Movement. These included resistance to colonialism by crossing both internal and international borders, with all their property for new settlements. The best example was in 1912, when 132 peasants crossed the Ankore-Kigezi border. The second effective and frequent form of resistance was through cutting and stealing telephone wires and smashing the insulators. While the stolen wire was used for manufacturing anklets and other ornaments, the whole act disrupted communication between Kigezi, Mbarara and Entebbe. Another related resistance was the interception of messengers and looting mail and parcels. Silence was another main weapon. In other cases, they would deceive the colonialists, aiming at derailing them.

Peasants developed a hostile attitude towards collaborators, sell-outs and the wavering. They punished collaborators through ostracisation, killing, and so on. It is not surprising that even some individuals took to committing suicide. Faced with the new invincible force, the peasants complicated their method of communication and speech. This denied colonialists and their local allies vital information. Confronted by this invincible adversary, the peasants had to build a secure, coherent internal system aimed at keeping out the enemy.

Even at the level of local languages, there was a problem of communication. There was a lot of distortion or misunderstanding by both parties, which was worsened by alien people being employed as interpreters and intermediaries. The peasants would decide to misunderstand certain commands and do the opposite or what was not wanted to be done. All this increased the dilemma of the state.