

Oral History and Gendered Terrain of Anti-Colonial Struggles among the Banyakigezi

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Abstract

This study explores the distinctive customs and traditions of the Banyekigezi, an indigenous community from Uganda's Kigezi region. Historically separate from other Ugandan groups, they played a crucial role in the Nyabingi rebellion against colonial rule. Despite this resistance, the Banyekigezi preserved their unique cultural practices, including tools and rituals with deep symbolic meaning. The research focused on how the cultural practices shaped the lives of Nyabingi followers, particularly during the colonial era. It examines aspects of Banyekigezi life such as transportation, entertainment, communication, warfare, household items, medicine, housing, and fashion. The Banyekigezi relied on a specific method of carrying people called "engozi" and used traditional instruments for music and communication. Their daily lives centered around tools and utensils made from natural materials. Healing was based on herbal remedies, and their homes were simple structures. Their clothing and ornaments held significant cultural and spiritual meaning. However, colonial rule, especially the 1912 Witchcraft Ordinance, severely damaged Banyekigezi culture. The study suggests strengthening institutions and raising awareness to appreciate the Banyekigezi's indigenous way of life. In essence, the article highlights the rich cultural heritage of the Banyekigezi and the urgent need to protect and promote it.

Keywords: Banyakigezi, Nyabingi movement, Anti-colonial struggles

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Introduction

Banyakigezi are an ethnic group of people who are inhabitants of the Kigezi region in south-western Uganda. They are comprised of Bakiga, Bahororo, Banyarwanda, Banyabutumbi, Batwa, Bafumbira and Bahunde people. According to Rutanga (1991) and (2011), Kigezi was a colonial creation through the 1911 Anglo-German- Belgian Agreement, in which the Kivu-Mulera-Ndorwa region was shared among the three imperialist powers. It is about 2045 square miles and covers the current districts of Kabale, Rukungiri, Kisoro, Kanungu, and Rukiga. Pre-colonial Kigezi was still at a low level of production, pre-capitalist and pre-industrial. They used rudimentary tools in agriculture, for example, hand hoes and machetes (Ian, 2019). The inhabitants of Kigezi also practiced cattle keeping at a low level, lived in the plain lands of Bufumbira, Rujumbura, and Rukiga (Mugarura, 1971). The cattle keepers exchanged animal products like milk, meat, ghee, and skins for grains and labour from the peasants. Barter trade was the main exchange medium for both pastoralists and agriculturalists.

During the anti-colonial struggle period in Kigezi (1900 and 1945), gender issues emerged as men dominated the political, social, and economic lives of their families while women were responsible for domestic care work, hence oppression based on gender and age at the household and community level. At the time,

administrative territories were still developing but kingdoms like Ndorwa, where Nyabingi religion is believed to have started, were highly developed, and their inhabitants, “Banyekigezi” their own its unique and distinct culturally symbolic way of life. For instance, they had their way of how they transporting themselves, their way of entertainment and, communication, the weapons and defensive mechanisms they used during the wars, household tools and apparatus, traditional ways of healing and treatment and shelter and housing, safety and hiding places during war, fashion, dress code, traditional ornaments that were worn by women, and the significance of their way of life (Rwampigi, 1980); Uzoigwe, 1975). Banyakigezi were also uniquely united under one religion, “The Nyabingi Movement”, whose pioneer leader, “Muhumuza” was supposedly believed to possess spiritual powers that could heal the sick, revive fertility in women, and also give fortune (Vokes, 2013; Redding, 1996). All these ways of life were disintegrated by the arrival of the colonialists who had their oppressive demands and were undermining the culture of the indigenous people (Turyahikayo, 1983).

According to Bessel (1938) and Brazier (1968), when the colonialists introduced new agonising demands, confiscating people’s land and misappropriating the freedom of Banyakigezi, the Nyabingi movement, which had initially formed as a

religious movement, had to transform itself into a political rebellion to bitterly oppose colonial atrocities and to liberate the local population from injustices and bad governance that were being legislated by colonial powers (Turyahikayo-Rugyema, 1976; Captain J.E.T. Philips, 1928; Freedman, 1974; Linden, 1972). All these resulted in the rise of armed struggles between the colonialists and the Nyabingi Movement under the leadership of Muhumuza. Muhumuza became the first in a line of rebel priestesses who fought colonial dominance in the name of the Nyabingi spirit (Brazier, 1968). She proclaimed to her fighters that nyabingi would save them from being killed by the bullets and that the bullets would turn to water before reaching her (Obbo, 1980). Because of Muhumuza's actions, the British considered her a threat to their political ambitions; hence, the 1912 "Witchcraft Ordinance" was passed by the British colonialists to link Nyabingi's activities as sorcery with the aim of preventing any other insurgences. And despite her arrest under this new law, detention, and death in 1945, the courage she demonstrated as a Nyabingi medium was able to shape the identity of the cultural landscape of Ugandan ethnic groupings, including the Banyakigezi. Muhumuza was also able to counter the stereotype attached to women in male dominated fields. This has since inspired many women to take on leadership positions and decision-making structures (Moon, 2019).

Methodology

The study employed a historical research design and used the data that had been collected using multiple data collection methods, including archival and documentary reviews and historical oral tales from the cultural leaders and elders; for the study which aimed at examining the feminine identities in anticolonial struggles in Kigezi region of south-western Uganda; hence, the analysis and presentation of the output followed a narrative and content discourse as recommended by Kothari (2004).

The way of life of Nyabingi followers among the Banyakigezi

The people of Kigezi had their own culture that was distinctive from other cultures in other parts of Uganda during precolonial days and the time of anti-colonial struggles until it was disintegrated by colonial powers. The followers of Nyabingi movement, who were entirely Banyakigezi, led a certain way of life that had symbolic significance to their culture. They also utilised a range of gender-specific items and tools in their homes for various purposes, and each one of them also had a cultural significance, as illustrated below:

Transportation during the Nyabingi period

The leaders, like Muhumuza and other key persons within the Nyabingi movement, and those who were not able to move independently,

particularly the sick (patients), brides during wedding ceremonies, old people (the elderly) and disabled, were often carried on *Engozi* stretchers. Furthermore, the brides would also be carried on it whenever there was a marriage ceremony, which was a sign of honoring the union of marriage as a blessing from the spirit Nyabingi. Muhumuza, as a leader, received special care and was often carried on *Engozi* or in a basket while covering herself. *Engozi* which is a woven stretcher, was and remains an important tool for transporting the above-mentioned groups of people in cases of emergency in hilly areas of Kigezi. With *Engozi*, the patients, pregnant women, old people, and

those that cannot walk on their own lie inside and it is carried by four people, especially men, on the sides of their shoulders. During the Nyabingi era, carrying someone who was a leader in *Engozi*, was often considered a sign of respect among the Bakiga people. The community often recognised the importance of their leadership role and hence, they took collective responsibility for their care. Men were considered to be very energetic, and it was their cultural obligation to carry the sick, leaders like Muhumuza, brides and even pregnant mothers. (See *Engozi* in figure 2 below.)

Figure 2: Samples of *Engozi* being carried by men



Source: *Igongo Museum cultural centre, 2020*

Entertainment items used

Entertainment within the Nyabingi movement played a crucial role in fostering community solidarity, uplifting and invoking Nyabingi spirit, and reinforcing the resistance against colonial oppression. In this case, music and dance were integral forms of entertainment within the movement. The entertainment was carried out using the items that had vital cultural symbolism attachment. The items used in such included *Enanga* (Trough Zither), *Eng'oma* (Drums), *Endingiri* (fiddle) among others.

Playing musical instruments such as *Enanga* (Trough Zither), *Engoma* (drums), singing, and dancing created a rhythmic and vibrant atmosphere, engaging participants and energising the community. The cultural symbolism attached to music and dance represented unity, cultural pride, and spiritual connection. It served as a means of cultural expression, invoking the power of ancestral spirits and reinforcing a collective identity among the resistance fighters. (See entertainment items used by Nyabingi followers in the figure 3 on the next page).

Figure 3: *Enanga* (trough Zither), *Akakyenye* and *Endinkiri* are traditional musical instrument that are unique among the Bakiga and Banyarwanda of Rwanda and Uganda



Source: *Igongo cultural centre in 2020.*

Oral storytelling (*Okwegyeseza omu bitebyo*)

This was another significant form of entertainment within the Nyabingi movement among the Banyakigezi. For instance, in the evening, especially after supper, an elder person sat near the fireplace with children and told them stories, myths, and historical accounts of the past with the intention of passing down knowledge and inspiring the younger generation. These children were always expected to pick the measures of the story and use them to shape their own conduct in the aspects of courage, hard work, cleanliness, and good manners. The cultural symbolism attached to storytelling emphasised the preservation of cultural heritage, the transmission of wisdom, and the documentation of resistance history. It fostered a sense of historical continuity and strengthened the determination of the community. In some cases, storytelling sessions were also used for moral education (*okwega emicwe y'obuntu*). This involved teaching young people, especially, girls about good manners in the homes. However, the moral education teachings were gender-specific, in that young people would sit and hear their elders' ways of solving domestic problems. Young women were particularly taught by an elder woman about family values, how to care for husbands, children, and in-laws, and how to maintain clean homesteads. This helped Banyakigezi marriages and relationships to be

strong and unshaken up to present-day Kigezi. The use of role-playing and dramatisation as entertainment allowed participants to recreate important events, myths, or struggles from their history. This form of performance art provided an immersive experience, enabling the community to engage emotionally with the narratives and draw inspiration for their ongoing resistance. The cultural symbolism attached to role-playing and dramatisation highlighted the importance of historical perception, empathy, and the empowerment gained through living out their collective stories.

Symbolic visual arts, such as paintings, murals, and sculptures, were utilised to convey messages of resistance, liberation, and cultural identity. Artists within the Nyabingi movement created artwork that depicted significant historical events, symbols of defiance, and representations of powerful figures. The cultural symbolism attached to the visual arts emphasised the role of art as a medium for propaganda, cultural revival, and the assertion of agency and pride in the face of oppression. Festivals and celebrations were organised within the Nyabingi movement to mark significant occasions or milestones. These events provided a sense of collective joy, unity, and rejuvenation. They served as opportunities for community bonding, reflection, and renewal of commitment to the resistance cause. The cultural symbolism attached to festivals and celebrations embodied resilience, hope,

and the affirmation of cultural practices in the face of colonial suppression. The entertainment activities in the Nyabingi movement carried a cultural symbolism that reinforced resistance, cultural pride, communal solidarity, and the preservation of heritage. They acted as vital tools for mobilisation, education, and maintaining the morale of the community, fostering a strong sense of identity and purpose in the face of colonial oppression.

Weapons used by Nyabingi Movement during Anticolonial struggles

During the anti-colonial struggles, gender specific weapons were often used, meaning men and women used different weapons. In most cases, men utilised weapons like spears, machetes, bows and arrows, and clubs in combat or for self-defense (shown in the photo on the right-hand side). On the other hand, if women were also involved in the fight, they would utilise weapons like; the *Rurara*, *Embaijo*, *Omutwero* (harvesting knife), digging sticks, stones, and other locally made knives (weapons illustrated in the figure 4 on the next page).

Time came when some men had access to firearms, such as rifles and handguns, and they also had access to military equipment and supplies, including uniforms, ammunition, and modern communication devices, often confiscated from enemies. However, fighting using traditional weapons like spears and bows, and arrows carried deep cultural

symbolism and conveyed a sense of identity, resilience, and ancestral connections. These weapons often represented a form of resistance against colonial oppression and a means of preserving cultural traditions. According to the study by Bessel, such weapons were used by men as a symbol that emphasised their roles as combatants and protectors. Hence, they were often used by men because culturally, men are the head of households, and therefore they are supposed by all means to protect all their people and their properties, but above all to preserve their culture from being destroyed by outsiders. Therefore, the above accounts shed light on why such tools and weapons were employed differently by men and women as they performed their practical and strategic gender roles to meet their needs in society and their significance within specific historical and cultural contexts, especially under the Nyabingi movement.

Items used for defense by Nyabingi followers

In the Nyabingi movement, shields (*Entaara*) and body armor made from materials like animal hides and tree barks were traditionally used defense and for protection during combat, both men and women may have utilised them during conflicts or resistance activities (See the figure 5 on the next page).

These shields and body armors in the context of the Nyabingi movement carried cultural symbolism that represented various aspects

Figure 4: Weapons used under the Nyabingi movement



Source: *Igongo Museum cultural centre 2020*

of resistance and protection in the following ways; shields and body armor were primarily associated with defense and protection. These shields symbolised the physical barrier between individuals and external threats. Shields and body armor represented the idea of standing strong against oppression and colonial forces, shielding oneself and the community from harm. The shields and body armor often held spiritual and ancestral significance. They were believed to carry the spiritual energy and protection of ancestors. The use of shields in the Nyabingi movement was seen as a way to invoke the presence and guidance of ancestors in the struggle against colonial oppression. The shields and body armor were culturally significant, representing the heritage and identity of the communities involved. Different regions and ethnic

groups had their own distinct styles and designs of shields, reflecting their specific cultural traditions and craftsmanship. The use of shields in the Nyabingi movement highlighted the connection to cultural roots and the assertion of cultural identity in the face of colonial dominance.

Shields and body armor served as a symbol of resistance and defiance against colonial forces. The act of carrying and displaying shields during protests, gatherings, or confrontations with the colonial authorities represented the determination to protect and defend one's community and rights. Shields embodied the spirit of resistance and the refusal to be subjugated. The use of shields and body armor in the Nyabingi movement fostered a sense of unity and solidarity among individuals and communities. Shields were often used collectively, forming a protective

Figure 5: Engabo used for defense (Shields)

Source: *Igongo Museum Cultural centre, 2020*

barrier that demonstrated the power of collective strength and cohesion. They symbolised the notion that the struggle against colonialism required collective action and a united front.

Household tools and apparatus used by Nyabingi followers

Oral history reveals that most of the tools were meant for economic sustenance and resilience were mostly used by women. These tools included; farming tools like hoes, sickles, and digging sticks to sustain their communities during times of conflict or to provide food for resistance movements. Women also used traditional items like *olubengo* (grinding stones), cooking pots, and clay-molded water pots for household tasks and communal activities. (See figure 6 below).

All these were mainly used by women, even during the hard times

of anti-colonial struggles. Because of the cultural symbolism linked to respective gendered roles and contributions attached to them, culturally, women were supposed to ensure the wellbeing of their respective households. Oral history accounts revealed that women's use of farming tools like hoes and handcrafting implements reflected their crucial roles in sustaining communities, providing food, and supporting the resistance effort through economic means.

Oral history contributes to the collective memory and preservation of the symbolic resonance associated with these items and tools. One archival source recounted narratives that are instilled in these objects with cultural significance, including heroic narratives, and a sense of collective identity. For instance, according to the oral histories, women were supposed to ensure that the memories and meanings attached to these items were

passed down through generations because they were the ones who often much bonded with the children. Another narrative links the practicality and necessity of farming implements or cooking utensils to serving dual purposes, especially during times of conflict. For instance, some individuals modified or repurposed everyday items for strategic purposes. For example, women transformed domestic utensils or household items into covert communication tools or improvised weapons. These accounts show that men and women leveraged their existing resources and practical knowledge to meet the demands of the resistance effort, but they also reveal the adaptive and innovative ways in which men and women utilised items and tools during anti-colonial struggles.

Communication tools used by Nyabingi Movement followers

In the context of the Nyabingi movement and other similar resistance movements in Africa, different

communication means were used to convey messages such as sermons, or to alert others in cases of danger. These systems of communication were either through whistling to transmit coded messages and signals across communities or through drumming, blowing whistles and horns. All these types of communication held cultural symbolism and played a significant role that united the communities with the Nyabingi held territories in Kigezi region. For instance, whistling was used as long distance system of communication under the Nyabingi movement. This kind of communication allowed fluent whistlers to transmit and comprehend a potentially unlimited number of coded messages over long distances. Whistled languages were different in this respect, because they were free from associative whistling. They were used to stimulate music, to attract attention, or to transmit simple messages or instructions to companions. Generally, whistled languages could emulate the tones or vowel formants of a natural spoken

Figure 6: Household items





Source: *Igongo museum cultural centre, 2020*

language, as well as aspects of its pitch, so that trained listeners who spoke that language could clearly understand the encoded message. For instance, the whistled speech was used as a form of communication because it abstracted certain aspects of spoken language into whistles. Therefore, these whistle languages could be understood by others in the speech community.

According to Busnel & Classe, (2013), whistled language is rare compared to spoken language, but it is found in cultures around the world. It is especially common

in tone languages where the whistled tones transmit the tones of the syllables (tone melodies of the words). This might be because in tone languages, the tone melody carries more of the functional load of communication, while non-tonal phonology carries proportionally less. Rialland, (2005), asserts that, the genesis of a whistled language has never been recorded in either case and has not yet received much productive study, yet it played a key role with regard to communication in the ancient era.

Drumming held crucial cultural symbolism associated with conveying messages, sermons, and signaling danger, both men and women used drums as a means of long-distance communication, transmitting coded messages and signals across communities. The symbolism and significance of drumming in transmitting messages and signals were deeply rooted in the cultural traditions, beliefs, and practices of the communities involved, contributing to their shared identity and resistance against colonial oppression in the following ways. Drumming was often seen as a means of connecting with ancestors and invoking their presence and guidance. The rhythms and beats produced by drums were believed to carry spiritual power and connect individuals with the spiritual realm. The use of drumming in communication during the Nyabingi movement was therefore seen as a way to seek the support and protection of ancestors in the struggle against colonial oppression (see figure 7 on the next page showing; drums, whistles, and horns).

From top left, is an original photo of the drum used in the kingdom of Rwanda for communication; the second drum is a sample of drums used for communication by the Nyabingi followers, the bottom left is a sample of horns that were used for conveying messages; and the bottom right are samples of whistles, one made from bamboo trees and another one made from wood. As seen from

the above figure (photo on the top left-big drum), it was said that, if a drum was struck more than once but on a countable frequency (on the side that produces base sound), then, it would signal a sermon for the meeting, and if it were struck continuously (on the other side that produces high tone), then it would signal danger, and the combatants would come over ready armed to face the enemy. On the other hand, blowing whistles and horns were utilised to relay specific messages or alerts among resistance fighters and communities. For instance, if whistles and horns were blown, it would signal a dangerous intruder, and therefore, the fighters would come out more than prepared to face a dangerous enemy.

Drumming played a crucial role in fostering a sense of collective identity and unity within communities. The rhythms and patterns transmitted through drumming were shared cultural expressions that bound people together. By using drumming as a communication tool, the Nyabingi movement aimed to unite individuals and communities, reinforcing a shared purpose and a sense of belonging. The use of drumming for transmitting coded messages and signals allowed for secrecy and resistance against colonial forces. Drumming provided a covert means of communication that could be understood only by those familiar with the specific codes and rhythms employed. This allowed communities to coordinate their

Figure 7: Communication items

Source: *Igongo museum cultural centre, 2020*

actions, share important information, and mobilise resistance without detection by colonial authorities.

Drumming in the Nyabingi movement served as a symbol of cultural revival and empowerment. By utilising traditional communication methods rooted in African cultural practices, the movement aimed to reclaim and celebrate their cultural heritage, asserting their identity and agency in the face of colonial oppression. Drumming not only served as a communication tool but also as a call to action and mobilisation. The rhythmic beats of the drums would often accompany gatherings, meetings, and protests, energising participants and signaling a collective

purpose. Drumming in this context symbolised activism, resistance, and the rallying of communities for the anti-colonial struggle.

The cultural symbolism attached to whistles and horns used for relaying messages and alerts among resistance fighters and communities during the Nyabingi movement and similar contexts in Africa can be understood in the following ways: Whistles and horns were often employed to convey urgent messages and raise alarms in times of danger or the need for immediate action. The loud, piercing sounds of these instruments were designed to catch attention and quickly alert individuals to specific situations or threats.

The cultural symbolism attached to whistles and horns in this context emphasised the need for vigilance, readiness, and swift response against colonial forces. Unlike drumming, which typically relied on rhythms and patterns, whistles and horns allowed for more specific and differentiated messages. Different combinations of short and long blasts or varying pitches and tones could convey distinct meanings or instructions. This gave the communication a greater level of precision and allowed for more nuanced coordination among resistance fighters.

Whistles and horns offered a form of covert communication that could be easily concealed and carried out discreetly. These instruments allowed resistance fighters and communities to transmit messages without drawing undue attention or arousing suspicion from colonial authorities. The cultural symbolism attached to whistles and horns in this context was associated with secrecy, subterfuge, and the ability to communicate covertly under oppressive conditions. The use of whistles and horns for communication had tactical significance, particularly in military or combat situations. They provided a means for commanders or leaders to issue commands, signal strategic maneuvers, or coordinate actions among resistance fighters in real-time. The cultural symbolism attached to these instruments emphasised their role in enhancing tactical effectiveness, unity, and coordinated efforts within the resistance movement.

Whistles and horns were symbols of interconnectivity and unity among resistance fighters and communities. The recognition and understanding of the specific sounds and signals conveyed by these instruments fostered a sense of collective identity and belonging. The cultural symbolism attached to whistles and horns emphasised their role in establishing a cohesive network and reinforcing the bonds of solidarity within the resistance movement. While both drumming and the use of whistles and horns served as communication tools in anti-colonial struggles, the key difference lies in the specificities of their messages, modes of transmission, and tactical functions. Drumming often had a broader symbolic and communal significance, while whistles and horns offered more direct and targeted communication, suited for specific situations, tactical coordination, and covert messaging.

Traditional ways of healing and treating diseases among the Nyabingi followers

The Banyakigezi especially Nyabingi followers had different ways of administering treatment to the patients. The Nyabingi ministers like Abaraguzi and Abafumu (traditional healers) were commonly consulted in case of sickness and illness. They mainly used traditional healing especially through use of herbal medicine and other traditional knowledge or indigenous knowledge,

for instance, if the baby had an abdominal pain, a mouth to mouth treatment locally called *Okujumburira* would be administered to the baby, this procedure is where the healer or a mother of the child chews herbal medicine like tobacco leaves and spits the juice into the child's mouth to cure abdominal pain and other diseases. If a person had a bout of malaria, constipation or any other stomach upsets he/she would be treated through a process called *Okuheereza Omutohooro* (Colon irrigation), this was a kind of treatment where medicine being pushed into the rectum using a small calabash or a straw. This was done so as to induce diarrhea so that the stomach would be washed off dangerous toxins. The physician (*omufumu*) would administer the treatment by pushing the medicine with pressure from his/her mouth.

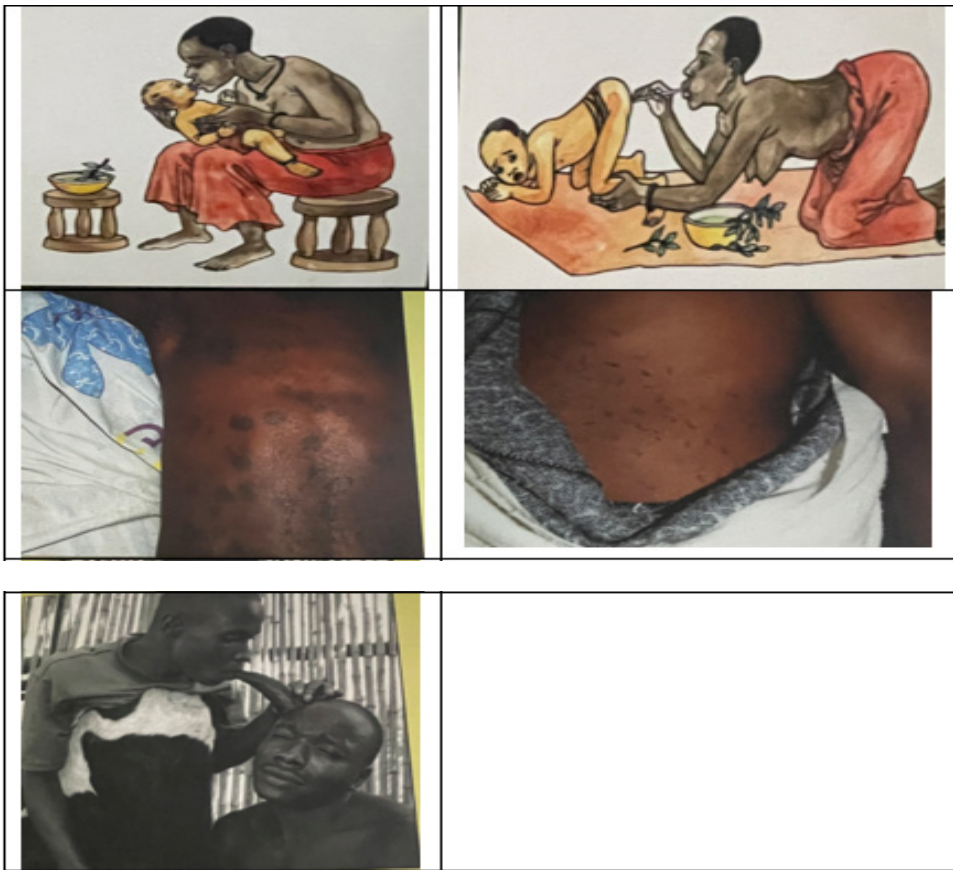
When one had a headache or muscular pain, a traditional doctor would use a treatment process called *Okushandaga*, where a sharp blade was used to make tiny cuts on the affected part of the body to cause the bleeding, which was expected to reduce the pain. This type was usually applied to the head or stomach of a person with an enlarged spleen (usually due to chronic malaria). Bakiga also used a treatment process called *Okurumika*. This was

also a traditional way of treatment where the healer would use a short piece of horn, place it on the painful part of the patient and suck out blood with the mouth and spit it out. This was mainly done to people suspected to be victims of witchcraft. They also used a treatment process called *Okwotya* (heat metal treatment). This method of treatment involved burning an affected part of the body using a hot metal. The size of the metal depended on the type of the sickness.

Shelter and safety during the Nyabingi resistance

Caves played a significant role in the Nyabingi movement, serving as places for sleeping and hiding for its followers. They held cultural symbolism that represented various aspects of protection, spirituality, and resistance. For instance, caves were seen as natural sanctuaries offering shelter and protection. They provided a refuge for Nyabingi movement followers, allowing them to rest, regroup, and seek solace away from the prying eyes of colonial authorities. The cultural symbolism attached to caves emphasised their role as safe havens, shielding individuals from harm and enabling them to continue their resistance against oppression (See Figure 8 on the next page).

Figure 8: Methods of Treatment Description



Source: Clockwise from top; Okujumburura, Okuheereza Omutoobooro, Okwotsya, Okushandaga, Okurumika; Source: Igongo museum cultural centre, 2020

Caves held spiritual significance and were believed to be imbued with supernatural powers. In African traditional beliefs, caves were often regarded as gateways to the spiritual realm or dwelling places of ancestral spirits. By seeking refuge in caves, Nyabingi movement followers sought a deeper connection with their ancestors, calling upon their guidance and spiritual protection in their struggle against colonial forces. The use of caves for sleeping and hiding underscored the importance

of secrecy and subterfuge in the resistance movement. Caves offered concealment and camouflage, allow followers to evade detection and surveillance by colonial authorities. The cultural symbolism attached to caves in this context emphasised the clandestine nature of the Nyabingi movement's activities and the need to operate covertly to safeguard its members.

Caves became symbols of resistance against colonial oppression. By utilising natural formations

like caves, Nyabingi movement followers expressed their refusal to be subjugated and their determination to protect their rights and culture. Caves represented a physical manifestation of the movement's resilience, adaptability, and ability to find strength and resources within their natural surroundings. Caves were often associated with ancestral legacies and oral traditions. They were believed to hold ancient wisdom and knowledge passed down through generations. Followers of the Nyabingi movement sought to tap into this collective wisdom and draw inspiration from the stories and experiences of their ancestors.

Food and nutrition for Nyabingi movement followers

The Nyabingi movement incorporated various communities and regions, each with their own specific dietary practices and available food resources. While it is challenging to provide an exhaustive list of foods eaten during the anti-colonial struggles, the following are some examples of commonly consumed foods and general aspects of feeding the followers within the Nyabingi movement. For instance, staple foods varied depending on the region, most of the Banyekigyezi depended on foods like sweet potatoes (*ebiribwa*),

Figure 9: Ruboona Rutare (caves) where the followers of Nyabingi used to sleep and hide during wars



Source: The pictures are from the expedition of the Duke of Mecklenburg taken in 1908. Also available at: <https://interlacustrine.blogspot.com/2015/11/nyabingi-and-colonial-rule.html>

The cultural symbolism attached to caves emphasised the reverence for ancestral connections and the preservation of cultural heritage in the face of colonial erasure.

Irish potatoes (*Emondî*), pumpkins (*Amoozi*), yams (*Amatekyere*), Sorghum bread and millet (*Omubemba* and *Oburo*), peas (*Amashaaça*), beans (*Ebibimba*) and Green vegetables (*Eshwiga*), cabbages, and cauliflowers. The grains were commonly used to make local drinks or porridge (*Obushera*, *Ekyanga*, *Enturire* and

Omuramba), bread (*Oburo*), or cooked as a main dish. They provided essential carbohydrates and sustenance for the Nyabingi followers, especially those who were at war. Women used grinding stones to grind sorghum and millet, which were being used for making alcohol, porridge, and flour for food and bread. This was of great significance as these ingredients were mostly used during festivals like marriage celebrations and Nyabingi initiation ceremonies.

Bush meat was also a common diet among the Nyabingi movement followers during the anticolonial struggles. In most cases, men used spears and arrows to hunt edible bush meat to feed their respective households. This was a source of protein and energy especially for the people at the war front. Legumes like beans, peas, lentils, and cowpeas, as well as a variety of vegetables, played an important role in the diet. They provided protein, vitamins, and minerals. Leafy greens, cabbages, cauliflower, okra, eggplant, tomatoes, and various root vegetables like sweet potatoes and irish potatoes were often included in meals. Indigenous and foraged foods were also used by the followers of the Nyabingi movement. For instance, they incorporated indigenous and foraged foods into their diets. This could include wild fruits, edible leaves, tubers, mushrooms, and other locally available resources. These foods

supplemented the diet and added nutritional diversity.

Animal products such as meat, milk, and eggs were consumed when they were available. Cattle, goats, sheep, and chickens were commonly raised in communities, and their products provided a valuable source of protein and essential nutrients. In the Nyabingi movement, communal feeding played a significant role. During gatherings, ceremonies, or collective activities, the community would come together to share meals. This fostered a sense of unity, solidarity, and mutual support among the followers. Food was often prepared and distributed by community members or designated individuals. In times of scarcity or during challenging circumstances, followers of the Nyabingi movement practiced sharing and redistribution of food resources. This ensured that everyone had access to nourishment, particularly during periods of heightened resistance or displacement caused by the anti-colonial struggles. It is important to note that the specific foods consumed and the feeding practices within the Nyabingi movement varied based on factors such as availability, cultural traditions, and individual circumstances. Food served not only as sustenance but also as a means to strengthen community bonds, provide nourishment during resistance efforts, and uphold cultural practices.

Fashion and dress code of the Nyabingi followers during anticolonial struggles

Before, the introduction of synthetic cloths, people used locally sourced materials such as bark clothes made from *Bitooma trees* that acted as clothes, while animal skins served multiple purposes, such as making clothes and shoes within the Nyabingi movement and carried cultural symbolism. For instance, animal skins as clothing and adornment within the movement provided practical protection from the elements, especially in rural and traditional settings. Animal skins were crafted into garments, such as cloaks, capes, or headdresses, which were worn by individuals during ceremonies, rituals, and gatherings. The use of animal skins in clothing symbolised a connection to nature and ancestral traditions. Animal skins, particularly those from powerful or revered animals, symbolised strength, courage, and resilience. Wearing animal skins within the Nyabingi movement was often associated with adopting the attributes and qualities of the animals themselves. It conveyed a sense of fearlessness, tenacity, and the ability to withstand challenges and oppression.

Animal skins had ritual and spiritual significance within the Nyabingi movement. They were used in ceremonies and rituals to invoke the spirits, seek blessings, and connect with the spiritual realm. Animal skins were believed to carry the essence

and power of the animals from which they came, making them conduits for spiritual energies and ancestral guidance. Animal skins represented a connection to the natural world and the environment. They served as a reminder of the intimate relationship between humans and the animal kingdom. By wearing animal skins, individuals within the Nyabingi movement sought to maintain a harmonious relationship with nature and acknowledge their interdependence with the natural world.

Animal skins held cultural significance and represented the heritage and identity of specific communities within the Nyabingi movement. Different animals were associated with particular ethnic groups or regions, and wearing their skins reinforced a sense of cultural pride and identity. Animal skins became symbols of cultural heritage and a tangible expression of belonging within the resistance movement. It is worth noting that the cultural symbolism attached to animal skins may vary across different regions and communities where the Nyabingi movement operated. However, specific animal skins held particular meanings and associations among the Bakiga culture. For instance, the cultural symbolism attached to skins of animals like the cheetah in the Nyabingi movement encompassed notions of strength, courage, spirituality, connection to nature, cultural heritage, and identity. Hence, this was mainly dressed up by key

leaders like Muhumuza. On the other hand, different traditional ornaments (*Amahunde*) were mended from different local items for adornment purposes. For instance, despite of the wars, the beautification, especially among women was also key. Hence, certain materials such as necklaces (*Ekisibegura ne Obwoshe bw'omumaraka*), bangles (*Obwoshe bw'aba mukono, Omuringa, Orugoobe/Akaraara*), Hair clippers (*Ensimbi, Ebishagiko, Akaita*) and feet decorations (*Enyerere* and *Amajugo*)

In the Nyabingi movement, Muhumuza and other leaders were often distinguished from others through various means, including their dressing and the care they received. For instance, Muhumuza in particular was different from others

in the following ways: Muhumuza and other leaders within the Nyabingi movement often received special care and support from their followers. This included assistance with daily tasks, the provision of food and shelter, or ensuring their physical well-being such as being carried on *Engozi* or hiding in a basket while covering her head. Muhumuza and other leaders in the Nyabingi movement would often wear attire that symbolised their elevated status and leadership role. This could include distinct clothing, accessories, or regalia that set them apart from the rest of the community. The specific garments and adornments varied depending on the cultural traditions and practices in the region.

Figure 10: Fashion and dress code of nyabingi followers



Source: *Igongo museum cultural centre, 2020*

Muhumuza and other leaders often carried or wore symbolic objects that represented their authority and spiritual connection. These included, amulets, charms, or sacred beads, bangles, bracelets, ornaments, and other decorative items associated with the Nyabingi movement's spiritual beliefs and practices. The presence of these objects further emphasised the leader's role and their connection to the movement's ideology. In some cases, Muhumuza and other leaders in the Nyabingi movement would adopt distinct headgear/head ring to differentiate themselves from others, most especially when going out to face the enemy. Elaborative unique head coverings could be also worn by Muhumuza as a symbol of leadership, spiritual power, or cultural significance.

Muhumuza and other leaders in the Nyabingi movement were entrusted with significant ritual and ceremonial responsibilities. They would lead or participate in important spiritual practices, ceremonies, and gatherings, guiding the community in their spiritual and resistance endeavors. Their involvement in these activities further set them apart as leaders. It is crucial to note that the specific ways Muhumuza and other leaders were differentiated within the Nyabingi or other movements that were operating

in Kigezi sometimes varied from how other leaders from elsewhere were differentiated. However, the cultural traditions, customs, and beliefs of

Figure 11: Traditional ornaments used by women in the past



Source: *Igongo museum cultural centre*, 2020

each group influenced the practices associated with leadership distinction. The differentiation of leaders through dressing, care, symbolic objects, and roles served to highlight their authority, spiritual connection, and elevated position within the movement.

Conclusion

This study examined the way of life of the Banyekigezi, the indigenous groups of people comprising Bakiga, Bahororo, Banyarwanda,

Banyabutumbi, Batwa, Bafumbira, and Bahunde, who are inhabitants of Kigezi region in south-western Uganda which covers current districts of Kabale, Rukungiri, Kisoro, Kanungu and Rukiga. Kigezi was formerly “the western province of the British colony”, which is 2045 square miles; a colonial creation through the 1911 Anglo-German-Belgian Agreement in which the Kivu-Mulera-Ndorwa region was shared among the three imperialist powers.

The Banyakigezi were the key followers of the Nyabingi movement, a religious-political rebellion that pioneered the anticolonial struggles in Uganda. Despite their active participation in anticolonial resistance, these indigenous groups maintained their own way of life that was culturally unique and distinctive from other cultures in other parts of Uganda. For instance, their use of a range of gender-specific items and tools for various purposes had a symbolic significance to their culture. The Banyakigezi had their own unique way of life. For instance, they depended on *Engozi* for transporting the sick, old, and leaders in the hills; they depended on drumming for entertainment, and regarding communication, they specifically utilised whistles, horns, and drums. They also used spears and arrows as weapons and as defensive mechanisms

they used wooded made shields during the wars. With household tools and apparatus, grinding stones, calabash, and pots were key traditional items. They also used traditional ways of healing and treatment, such as using herbs, while regarding shelter and housing, they used caves as sleeping and hiding places during war. The fashion and dress code, and body ornaments that were worn were also culturally symbolic since they were made from traditional materials such as animal skins that were believed to have a connection to the Nyabingi spiritual powers. The Banyakigezi led this way of life during precolonial days and the time of anti-colonial struggles until it was disintegrated by colonial powers, especially under 1912 Uganda’s Witchcraft ordinance which linked to the superstition most of the items that were being used by these indigenous groups of people and most especially those who believed in Nyabingi religion and participated in the anticolonial struggles.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study recommends interventions in institutional capacity building and concurrently creating awareness to redefine national development priorities to recognise the indigenous way of life so as to promote the national identity.

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