

THE STATE OF BAGANDA WOMEN INVISIBLE IN TRADITIONAL CULTURAL LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Across the world most societies began as patriarchies with a male head, and power, succession and wealth following the male line. However, many societies have in the last century been forced to revisit the social, economic, political and educational disadvantages of subjugating and silencing 50% their adult populations. The needs of successful modern establishments demand momentous progress towards gender balance providing equal opportunities and status to men and women. Buganda, the home of the Baganda ethnic group, has historically not had social and political structures to which women can aspire, and their contributions to significant change have often been attributed to their fathers or husbands. Planning for a successful future in the 21st century, requires gender rebalancing.

Key Words

Baganda women, leadership, economic, social, educational, contributions, international, national and cultural role models

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Buganda is documented to have prospered, struggled and progressed through the gallant activities of men. Although women cannot be said to have been happy with their place in society, they accepted the status quo. This paper argues that with the advent of education, economic and social emancipation, it is imperative that the Kingdom addresses the current position of women in its leadership. There is a need to establish cultural structures and roles, that will make best use of all of Buganda's talents to its ultimate long term survival and prosperity.

There are external drivers for change at international level, at national level and within Buganda itself. Baganda women number over 3 million, and they actively participate internationally and nationally in political leadership, economic, education, cultural and financial arenas. However, they have no effective access to engagement in cultural political leadership or strategic planning of Buganda, their ethnic group. To a Kingdom that requires economic, financial, and social support to thrive and grow, ignoring the potentially beneficial contributions of half its 6 million population is a high value loss. Structures need to be set in place to speed up gender reform in the Kingdom. The 'gender penalty' women pay is evidenced in their few numbers actively participating in Buganda's political and cultural leadership. So both Buganda and its women are diminished by the current situation.

1. POLITICAL CONTRIBUTION

Women who aspire to leadership positions have many role models on international and national horizon to emulate. Looking at international women's political leadership, during the 20th Century, women reached the pinnacle of power with Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka becoming the first woman Prime Minister in 1959. Indira Gandhi became India's Head of Government; Benazir Bhutto was Pakistan's first woman Prime Minister. In 2005 we saw the election of Angela Merkel of Germany, 2006

Executive President Ellen Johnson-Sir Leaf of Liberia, 2006 the Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica, and in 2007- President Borjana Kristo, Federation of Bosnia.

At a national level, since Uganda's political independence more than 40 years ago, Baganda women have increased understanding of political parties, processes and power from grassroots level, right up to parliamentary level. Such experiences have provided opportunities as never before and numbers of Baganda women in national politics has increased inexorably. Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association (UWOPA) is a forum for Women MPs to discuss, share experiences and support activities that would enhance women's participation, effective leadership in all dimensions of politics including socio-economics, science and technology. UWOPA's aim is to become a major contributor to a just and gender sensitive constitution, legislation, national policies that enable political, social and economic empowerment of the women and men in Uganda. Well known, Baganda women parliamentarians over the years are innumerable, including Rhoda Kalema, Janet Nantume Janat Mukwaya, Syda Bbumba, Sarah Nyombi Nansubuga, Miriam Mwaka, Ruth Nvumetta Kavuma, Margaret Zziwa, Ruth Nankabirwa, Victoria Sebagereka Kakoko and many more.

Turning to Buganda, the way it is traditionally organised, and the participation of women in cultural politics and leadership. Men still hold most of the power and influence. It is true royal princesses ba Lubuga, ba Nalinnya have historically had demonstrable political influence over the Kabakaship. However, even in the royal palaces, the role of women is generally muted, unless at the level of a Nalinnya or Namasole. (The deafening silence of the contemporary Nnabagereka's role at international level is typical and bemusing, since because of its historical nature, if properly exploited, it could raise much needed financial resources for women and girls.) Buganda's political core is made up of the heads of the 52 clans, Abataka Abobusolya. They sit regularly in Bulange Mmengo, and contribute to all Buganda's major contemporary future strategic decisions. There are no female bataka and needless to say, the Kattikiro, (Cultural Prime Minister) has always been male. There are also few women appointed to posts of gravity in Bulange Mmengo. The women who are evident tend to be in positions to do with encouraging culture, sports, behaviour, raising children – not the important positions of Treasury, Land Board, Education, Planning, or Engineering. If we consider Kabaka Mutebi's reign, women in positions have included Joyce Ssebuggwawo, Victoria Sserunjogi, Hajjati Sarah Baagalaaliwo, Florence Bagunywa Nkalubo to name but a few. There is a lot to be said for elevating the role of women's political participation in the affairs of Mmengo.

2. ACCEPTED SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Traditionally, the role of a Muganda woman is to support her father, her clan, and ultimately her husband. In the past she was often not as well educated as the men in the family, many were married off at an early age and encouraged to focus on domestic matters. Indeed anecdotal evidence would suggest that this is not a role many Baganda men are uncomfortable with, although in the 21st century, this is unrealistic.

Women have made an enormous cultural contributions as daughters, as sisters, as mothers, wives, sengas (aunts), as grandmothers. They are teachers and upholders of language, cultural norms. They take care of children and instil good social values, advise other women to leave violent and exploitive relationships, support the frail and the dying in a country where there are no health or social services. To further improve the social contribution of women, Buganda should have a focus on educating girls, as a component in the more global effort to end world poverty. Educating girls improves the

health and economic well being of women and their offspring, with subsequent multiplier effects of improving women's political and civil society involvement, as well as active participation at national level. Factors that limit education opportunities for girls include parental poverty and inability to pay school fees. Many academically able girls are married off early or sent off to work in urban areas as soon as finance worries in families begin. The HIV epidemic in much of Africa means many girls are pulled out of school to care for close relatives who are sick, or for lack of school fees when economically active parents die prematurely.

A people's culture is progressed and practiced mainly in the spoken and written word, as well as in traditional music and works of art. As nurturers of the young, as mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers, women have made a contribution to passing on Kiganda language and culture. It is women's paternal aunts that educate girls about how to conduct themselves, and in the ways of marriage and relationships. Kiganda culture is also evident in outputs of accomplished female artists, singers, songwriters, authors and oral storytellers. It is true the work of the more educated is the most acknowledged, however, there are many women writers of cultural practices, children's story books, documentation of Kiganda history, and then there are painters and sculptresses. In many households, women weave mukeeka mats from palm tree leaves, they also make baskets (bibbo).

3. ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION

The role of women in subsistence farming communities cannot be underestimated. Baganda women and girls have been responsible for tilling the land, growing food and cash crops (coffee and cotton) for generations. With little recognition, homesteads have flourished on the hard work of women and their daughters. With education and careers has come economic emancipation. The ownership of land is mainly in the hands of men, however women owning land as daughters and wives of the Kabaka's men (Bakungu etc) in leadership positions was not uncommon. These days women buy acres of mailo land in their own right. Women have been trading freely since the Idi Amin days, involved in selling coffee, cotton and trade between Uganda and neighbouring countries, indeed these days women are trading in Dubai, India, Japan and Malaysia. Although it is still only a relatively small elite number of women who have gone to university, many women have economically successful careers in trading, in cultivation, property development and other activities. Significant numbers of women no longer rely on men for the roof over their heads, or indeed for their children's education. Others have gone abroad to work (kyeeyo) as far out as Europe, America, Arab countries, Asia, and regularly send money to Buganda to meet their family commitments. Women have brought up not only their own children, but also the children of relatives who have died of AIDS. So many women in Uganda and abroad have worked hard to improve the situation of their own children and those of their siblings. Professional women in the Diaspora include financiers, bankers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, engineers, public servants and influential opinion formers in their political environments. But are these achievements Buganda can ever call upon? Surely the Kingdom needs to engage women on a level they understand if it is to benefit from this success. We can take comparative examples from other Diaspora communities, and how they have made an effective contribution from whence they came. Baganda women will want political and social participation, accountability and transparency before they will share their hard earned resources with Bulange Mmengo and Buganda.

4. IMPACT OF FAILING TO ENGAGE 50% OF A POPULATION

It cannot be a strength for Buganda to ignore the potential of 3 million people or to kid themselves that in the not too distant future, Baganda women will be subjected to the economic and social controls culture had on their grandmothers. The Muganda woman used to raise her sons to be strong, to lead and make good momentous decisions, and her daughters to be soft spoken, mild mannered, without strong opinions, hard working in the field and kitchen, house cleaning and child rearing. I suggest that in this day and age, a mother's objectives have permanently changed and she rears both sons and daughters to be responsible, survivors, independent, good decision makers, in and out of the home. Women being economically and socially independent is not *deviant behaviour*, but the norm. Women and girls have been brought up in systems that believe in gender equality over the past 60 years, in education and in the work place. More and more girls are being brought up in urbanised areas, where they aspire to be economically and socially independent, rather than be supported by men. Baganda girls born in the Diaspora are particularly alienated by the projection of quiet, meek and mild women with no personal opinion, leaving decision making to the men in their lives. The need for change is clearly evident, and Buganda can either make this a positive experience, with a constructive, enviable plan and timetable for women's comprehensive integration in affairs of Buganda; or resist reform risking its marginalisation by Baganda women, who will instead drift into more lucrative careers and rewarding leadership avenues elsewhere. Once they see no future in Buganda's direction, they will not instil any interest of Buganda in their daughters.

There are unambiguous threats to the Kingdom if the status quo continues. The abolition of Kingdoms in 1966, means that many people born in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s did not grow up within an active Kingdom. Secondly over 80% of this population is under 30 and find it difficult to articulate the relevance of Buganda to their lives. If so many cannot in future instil in their children the importance of Buganda and the catastrophe it would be to their inheritance if Buganda were to perish, the end is nigh.

Buganda has a growing force of women lawyers, financial experts, educationists, doctors, engineers, town planners, scientists and thinkers. Those who wish to contribute to leadership positions in society, feel the only opportunity is to turn to national or international arenas, since there are no prospects of them serving their people effectively in the Mmengo structure. Young Baganda women do not have adequate role models to emulate in Buganda's leadership. There is a serious disadvantage in women turning their backs on Buganda, if they consider it a retrograde career step. No community can effectively flourish in the 21st century, working at 50% of full potential.

Opportunities Missed

The example below possibly echoes with many other women in Buganda and in the Diaspora, whose commitment and attempt to find solutions have been rebuffed because they are women – to Buganda's disadvantage.

In 2000 I had a proposal to improve the capacity of the Bataka, so that they can engage more effectively and more actively during Lukiiko meetings. The 52 Bataka are typically poor, from rural backgrounds, not too highly educated, and apart from traditional leadership skills handed down from father to son, have no modern leadership skills to support them as clan leaders (Abakulira Obusolya). Yet so much is expected of them at Lukiiko meetings, levels of understanding and articulation way beyond their capacity. Transport to the Lukiiko is hard for the majority of them and I was trying to investigate the possibility of a bicycle each for getting around, not only to come to Lukiiko meetings,

but also to and from the many Clan events, burials, kusumika, batambuza ennyimbe, they have Mituba, Masiga meetings – their work is in fact endless. Somehow does not appear to be appreciated by their clans. Within the Bataka group, few are well dressed, in suits, most clothes have seen better days. To give them some kind of dignified uniformity when they appeared in public, the initiative's intention was to annually provide each with a new kanzu and blazer. The leadership training and computer literacy initiative was to be a joint venture with the Uganda Management Institute. Omutaka Kaita was the head of the Bataka at the time; he invited me to address the Bataka meeting at Bulange Mmengo. I have made hundreds of presentations in my time, for various causes to British politicians and community leaders in Town Halls, in the British Houses of Parliament and even in international conferences abroad - so this to me sounded like a 15 minute piece of cake. Seeking directions to the correct room within Bulange, several people curiously asked whether I was sure I knew where I was going. I only realised what they meant when I entered a large room, it was full of only men. I walked in tentatively to the front and sat with Omutaka Kaita, facing the whole group. They proceeded to introduce themselves one by one representing the 52 clans. Everything my Sengas and grandmothers had instilled in me screamed that I should have worn a busuuti and given the presentation whilst firmly down on my knees. But this was a business meeting, not a cultural event; the dilemma had no resolution - an insurmountable clash of culture and education. The Bataka were very good, polite, listened intently and were touched a woman in the Diaspora was concerned about their plight and prepared to do something about it. So much was expected of them, but there was little investment in their social, educational and economic circumstances. The outcome of this was that hurdles galore were strewn in the path of the project and, although I passionately believe in this initiative, I had to abandon it for lack of time in Uganda. I have always thought the fact the initiative was being spearheaded by a woman fundamentally weakened it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That Ttabamiruka advocates this issue with the Kabaka, and offers Diaspora support to amend cultural and political leadership structures to offer opportunities for women at the highest levels.
2. That the Deputy Katikkiro post be targeted at women, based on ability
3. That each Clan is encouraged to recruit a women representative to work with the Mutaka Owa Kasolya who should attend Bataka and Lukiiko meetings
4. That the education of Baganda girls through secondary school be prioritised and have an identified budget.
5. That a time table is set to achieve these targets; with quickest gains within 12 months, and the longer term objectives 5 years.

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