

UPC And The Obugabe

By Yoga Adhola

Since the death of John Barigye, the son of the last Omugabe of Ankole, there has been a lot of discussion on the restoration of the Obugabe. The Obugabe and the domination of the Bairu by the Bahima was brought to an end by the revolution of 1966 which UPC brought about. I feel these discussions that have gone on since the death of John Barigye have not sufficiently dealt with the role of UPC in the abolition of the Obugabe.

A little background is necessary. In the dim past, probably several centuries back, the Bahima pastoralists arrived in present Ankole, conquered the Bairu who were the indigenous population and established Hima domination in the area. This domination was "expressed by inferior legal status and the obligation of tribute paying; and along with inferior legal status went inferior social status amounting essentially to a caste difference." The dividing line between Bahima and Bairu was not only marked by race - the Bahima have different racial features from Bairu; but also by certain prohibitions and different modes of livelihood.

The Bahima depended for their livelihoods on cattle while the Bairu on agriculture. The Bairu were not permitted to own productive cows; nor were they allowed to marry Hima girls yet Hima boys could take Bairu girls for concubines. If a Mwiru came to possess a productive cow, any Muhima had the right to take it from him. The Bairu were barred from military service and no Mwiru could hold high official positions. Traditionally too, the Bairu were serfs whose exploitation took the form of tribute in food and labor. Furthermore, they had no political status being serfs.

To maintain this system of oppression and exploitation, the Bahima had not only to get politically organized and also to evolve a state apparatus. Centered around the Mugabe (King) as the hub of Hima political apparatus, the Hima state provided protection against foreign aggression and also maintained Bairu in a subordinate position. When the British came, they merely refashioned the Hima state and, through the system of indirect rule, used it to run this part of the colony. Thus British colonialism, for the time that it lasted, served to entrench Hima domination over the Bairu, with the ruling stratum in Ankole being numerically dominated by Bahima throughout the colonial period.

As time went on, colonialism occasioned social development that undermined social stratification along caste lines. "The effect of modern education was to instill egalitarian orientations and aspirations among an increasing number of Bairu giving rise to a growing sense of dissatisfaction over their status as second class citizens. Bairu also developed an awareness of greater self-sufficiency from this mastery of modern skills, as well as from new sources of income made available to them through the cultivation and sale of cash crops".

This led Bairu to demand for equality, particularly following the Second World War. A major milestone in these struggles was the formation by Bairus of an organisation called *Kumanyana* at Mabarara High School in the late forties.

One of the greatest achievements of Kumanyana was the election of Kesi Nyanwa as the Engazi (Chief Minister) of Ankole. Nyanwa was the first Mwiru to hold that post, and his election was very uplifting to the Bairus. They gave him the title of Ruterengwa which means nothing compares with him. The Hima strongly objected to this title because it implied that Nyanwa was of higher status than the Mugabe.

In this agitation against Hima domination, the most articulate and vocal voices came from those who eventually became leading figures in the Ankole branch of UPC. The abolition of the kingdoms and their paraphernalia brought to rest these struggles: the dominance of the Bahima over the Bairu came to an end.

The changes that UPC put in place in Ankole and other parts of Uganda is what is called a national-democratic revolution. By national-democratic revolution is meant a movement to eliminate national and colonial oppression (to say nothing of winning economic independence and the attendant tasks of socio-economic progress) as well as forge the nation of Uganda. It also is a movement of breaking up feudal and pre-feudal relations.

In the past epochs these historic tasks were called bourgeois or bourgeois democratic. This was so because the tasks, in places like the United States of America in the 18th century, were not only undertaken to bring about a bourgeois society, but they were also led by the bourgeoisie. It is the bourgeois character of the leadership as well as the bourgeois interests the revolutions served that determined the character of these revolutions in the previous epoch.

The revolution that UPC under the leadership of Obote was carrying out was not being led by the bourgeoisie nor was it intended to serve the interest of that class. The tasks that had come to the fore were merely democratic tasks. And since these democratic tasks were taking place at the same time as the forging of the Uganda nation, we shall call this revolution national-democratic.

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