

A Step-by-Step Account of the Black Saviors of Uganda

By Glenn Kittler

"The King is dead!"
For a week, the rumor had persisted, but no one outside the royal compound could be sure of it. For spread through the land, the fingers of boiling lava that threatened every corner of the kingdom.

The death of a king meant terror and riots and killings, as his heirs fought for the throne. No one could be safe. So there was fear, and everywhere the question: "Is it true? Is the Kabaka dead? Why don't they tell us? Why doesn't somebody do something?"

Then came the Prime Minister. The King's death was the first thing that they were to come to the royal compound on the hilltop at Rubaga. When they arrived, they saw that the compound was surrounded by soldiers armed with rifles.

Passing through the gate, the chiefs were led to the throne room where the King held court.

The Katikro waited until the room was quiet, and then he said: "It is my sad duty to inform you that our beloved Kabaka, Mutesa the First, is dead."

So it was true, then. Now what?

The Katikro went on: "The sacred flame has been extinguished, and the keeper of the flame has been killed in order to accompany Mutesa as a servant through the next world." This was as it should be, a king should not travel alone.

The Katikro "I have consulted with the council, and we have agreed on the choice of our new king. We have selected Prince Mwangi if anyone wishes to fight him, let him come forward now."

The chiefs—even the princes—were too stunned, too surprised to accept the traditional challenge to dethrone a new king by defeating him in battle. No one moved.

The Katikro turned to the line of princes. "Mwangi is your king," he said. "The rest of you are nothing but peasants. Step forward and fight him, or kneel in obedience."

Bovelled by the suddenness of events, the princes did not think to oppose the Katikro's choice. After a moment of uncertainty, they dropped to their knees. A cry went up: "Mwangi is king!"

The sacred fire was lit. King Mwangi's reign began. He was nineteen years old.

All this occurred one October day in 1884 in the Kingdom of Buganda on the northwestern shores of Lake Victoria in the wooded heart of Africa. In the throne room that tense morning were a number of young men whose names were to be recalled by Pope Paul VI during canonization ceremonies at St. Peter's in Rome, eighty years later, almost to the day.

That day, long ago, events took shape which would provide equatorial Africa with its first martyrs. And it was the new and young King Mwangi who would bring these events about.

That day, on the far side of Lake Victoria, four Catholic priests went about their regular missionary duties. They were members of the Society of Missionaries of Africa, popularly known as the White Fathers because of their white, Arab-styled habit.

White Fathers

Founded at Algiers in 1861 by Charles Cardinal Lavigne, they had been the first Catholic missionaries to enter the equatorial interior, arriving at Buganda in 1878 after a thousand-mile trek from the Indian Ocean. And they were now, in effect, an exile.



Picture depicts the 22 Uganda martyrs canonized last Sunday by Pope Paul at the Vatican.

Here is the dramatic story of the twenty two saints canonized by Pope Paul at the Vatican last Sunday. It is reprinted with permission from October Sign magazine published by the Passionist Fathers of Union City, N.J. Author of the article is a free-lance journalist who has also written a book "The White Fathers," the missionary order which staffed the Uganda mission where the martyrs had been instructed in the Christian faith. This story will be published in pamphlet form by the American White Fathers Society.

The dead King Mutesa had hoped to profit by pitting the British Protestant and French Catholic missionaries in Buganda against each other, and he was guided in this by Arab merchants who were steadily profiting from slave trade and the barter of hides and ivory for trinkets and hashish.

There was, thus, unavoidable strife between the two denominations as the king, already favoring one against the other but mostly damned both in favor of the Moslems in 1881, Mutesa announced that his forefathers had ordered him to murder ninety-nine native Christians or suspected Christians.

The order was carried out, but most of the victims were actually suspected political threats to the king.

In order to prevent further bloodshed on such spurious grounds, the White Fathers decided to leave Buganda for a while, crossing Lake Victoria to Tanganyika.

The day they left, Prince Mwangi, then sixteen, accompanied them to their boats, and he said: "I know why you are leaving, and I'm very sorry, but I suppose it's the right thing to do. What hurts most is knowing that my father is responsible for all this. I like you very much, and I promise that I will always let my servants pray as you taught them. Maybe some day, if I become king, things will be different and you can come back. I hope so. Pray for me." The White Fathers took heart from this.

At nineteen, however, King Mwangi was a far different person from the youth who had

And entertainment, King Mwangi would not interfere with his own step on the country and its riches.

Surely the young King would not allow the growth in Buganda of a religion that denounced his own pleasures. Moreover, during the past three years, the European missionaries, led by the Reverend Alexander Mackay, of Scotland, had remained in the country, running a school but not proselytizing. Although Mwangi had once befriended them, he now no longer felt near them. The Katikro felt, was a good sign.

His only worry was the possible return of those Frenchmen, who could not open their mouths without talking about their God.

Uncertain Interlude

After the priests had departed, the Catholics went underground. There were some important people among them: Abbot Kiggwa, director of the

When Mwangi saw Father Lourdes, he left his throne and came forward, his arms outstretched. Embracing the priest he said: "Oh, Father, I'm so glad to see you. It's been so long. You've no idea how I've missed you."

Lourdes was overwhelmed by the display. He returned the embrace, then stepped back to apprise the young king.

Mwangi seemed to have put on weight; his face was puffy, his nose fleshy, and there were bags under his eyes. His eyes were bloodshot; his breath smelled suspiciously of hashish. He spoke in a rush of words, punctuating his sentences with

"I'm the King now," Mwangi said. "I should like to see you to return and that I shall send my own soldiers to bring them back."

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