2020-04

Elizabeth Ruhubya (a woman's biography built from fragments)

Elizabeth Ruhubya
(A Woman's Biography Built from Fragments)

By Emma Wild-Wood[2]

Ruhubya[3] lived in the Boga[4] area, on the Smeliki escarpment. This is now in North-east D.R. Congo, close to the Ugandan border. She was one of the first members of the Anglican Church in Boga and became a teacher in the Church. Ruhubya had an early and continuous role in women's leadership. Twice she led the small church in Boga through early challenges.

Ruhubya was baptised on April 4, 1897, along with twelve other people, including her husband, Muchwangobe and their son Kaduku. Ruhubya and Muchwangobe took the names of a well-known biblical couple, Elizabeth and Zachariah and their son was named John. They had received catechism from Apolo Kivebulaya (c.1865-1933), a missionary to Boga from Buganda and were baptised by Church Missionary Society missionary from Britain, Rev. John Callis. One of the other women who was baptised, Damali Nyaju, also became a trained church teacher from 1904 to 1914.

In December 1896, Elizabeth Ruhubya had provided food for the Baganda church teachers Kivebulaya and Sadulaka Zabunamakwata, when they first arrived in the village of Boga and helped them tend their gardens. From January 1897 Ruhubya started to learn to read.

Ruhubya, in asking to learn to read, upset her husband who did not want her to act without the chief's permission. The chief, Tabaro, tried to dissuade Kivebulaya from allowing Ruhubya to join the class by saying she was of bad character and may bring him into disrepute. Kivebulaya was undeterred.

Another woman baptised with Ruhubya, Malyamu Tuguita, had a fatal accident in January 1898. Kivebulaya was blamed for the accident and was arrested and beaten. Ruhubya protested about the accusations and treatment of Kivebulaya and was also beaten. She hid two other men who were also accused with Kivebulaya but Muchwangobe revealed their whereabouts. For several months, while Kivebulaya was under arrest, women would meet secretly at Ruhubya's house to pray, slipping out of their houses claiming to look for firewood. In this manner, Ruhubya kept the small church community alive.

---

[2] Emma Wild-Wood, co-director of the Center for the Study of World Christianity, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom, is the author of a critical biography, *The mission of Apolo Kivebulaya: Social Change and Religious Encounter in the Great Lakes 1865-1935* (James Currey, 2020). She is professor of African Religions and World Christianity at the University of Edinburgh. Previously she taught in D.R. Congo and Uganda as a CMS mission partner.

[3] Ruhubya (Anglican / died 1919 / DR Congo/Uganda)

[4] Historically,'Boga' is also spelled 'Mboga.'

In January 1905, Ruhubya became a licensed teacher (or catechist), having trained across the Semliki escarpment in Kabarole (Fort Portal) in the Kingdom of Tooro, Uganda. She may have moved after the death of her husband. Ruhubya was one of at least forty-five women were trained as teachers between1902 and 1909. She seems to have served the church in Tooro until her death in 1919, although there is only a little information on her work.

From some years Ruhubya acted as housekeeper for Kivebulaya's household. The house was on the CMS mission station, near St John's Church, at the centre of the Anglican church's activities in Tooro. It was the place where church teachers met together and passed the night. Ruhubya had her own room that she shared with female visitors. Other widows lived in an adjacent house within the household. Kivebulaya appeared to have assumed the role of male protector for Christian widows but he was often away on missionary journeys. The smooth running of the household probably fell to Ruhubya. She looked after the children whom Kivebulaya housed and schooled. She was the daily support of vulnerable widows. Since the household was a hub for pastoral care and practical support, she would have been a significant figure on the mission station. On December 13, 1915, Ruhubya accompanied Kivebulaya to her home village of Boga. The Christian group had been depleted and isolated by the colonial boundary between Uganda and Congo established in 1910. Kivebulaya and Ruhubya's visit was intended to encourage and support them. Ruhubya visited the women while Kivebulaya visited the men. Together they organised the rebuilding of the church building: women cleared the site and fetched the water and clay, while men made the wattle, fetched trees from the forest and thatched the roof. For some time, Ruhubya stayed in Mboga to teach the women. In February 1918 Ruhubya became unwell. She died the following year.

Ruhubya lived at a time of religious and social change when women could take modest leadership roles in fledgling congregations. Increasingly, her role was focussed in domestic or female-only spaces.

Bibliography:

Louise Pirouet, *Black Evangelists: The Spread of Christianity in Uganda 1891-1914*, London: Rex Collins, 1978, pp.53-75.

Emma Wild-Wood*, The Mission of Apolo Kivebulaya: Religious Encounter and Social Change in the Great Lakes* (Woodbridge, James Currey, 2020), esp. pp.134-5, 138-9, 165 & 192.

Emma Wild-Wood with George Mpanga, *The Archive of a Uganda Missionary: Writings by and about Apolo Kivebulaya, 1895-1934,* (Oxford, British Academy, 2022), esp. 'Kivebulaya's diaries' p.21; Nasanari Kabarole's testimony,' pp. 164-5. & 167; 'Jacob Tibenderama's testimony,' p.186; 'Erisaniya Munubi,' p.221.