

The Kibwetere Cult killings

Exactly 22 years ago, on March 17, 2000, in south-western Uganda's Kanungu district, more than 400 Ugandans belonging to the Movement for The Restoration of the Ten Commandments, the infamous Kibwetere cult were locked inside a church, with the doors and windows nailed shut from the outside. It was then set ablaze. Others were found buried in mass graves all that day.

The Makerere report, published by the Marianum Press of Kisubi and written by Gerard Banura, Chris Tuhirirwe, and Joseph Begumanya - established that the cult's core leaders were Joseph Kibwetere, 68, Credonia Mwerinde, 48, and Fr Dominic Kataribabo, 64.

According to report compiled by researchers from Makerere University's Department of Religious Studies, the Movement's leaders had predicted the end of the world on December 31, 1999. "Prior to this, darkness was to cover the world for three days from December 29.

Once the world came to an end, only cult members gathered at their camp would be saved," says the report. When 2000 came and none of these predictions came to pass, discontent rose among the members. Some realised they had been duped and started demanding the return of property they had surrendered to the church.

"A chaotic situation developed in the camp. The golden rule of silence was broken. All work stopped. Members became disloyal and started to mix freely with outsiders. Then the leaders told them that the Virgin Mary had reappeared to them and extended the date for the end of the world," the report reveals. As the end of the world grew increasingly elusive, members were asked to go back to their homes, and told they would be informed when to return to be taken to heaven. Later, the leaders spread the word that the Virgin Mary had extended the date by two months, to March 17, 2000.

A week before the fateful day of March 17, members from the cult's other camps were brought to Kanungu and on the "doomsday," celebrations took place including a sumptuous meal- "a last supper. "March 17 began normally enough, with members trooping into the old church for morning prayers. However, they had been told that today they would be locked in and that the Virgin Mary would come personally, "clothed in flames" to take them to heaven. The pretext for locking them in was that only those insides would be delivered.

Only 17-year-old Peter Ahimbisibwe, who had left earlier to buy food, survived "Mary's flames," which engulfed the church, leaving an estimated 500 people dead. Later, more bodies were discovered underneath houses owned by the cult, garroted, mutilated and poisoned: 155 in Rugazi, Bushenyi on March 27; 153 in Rutooma, Rukungiri district, on March 25; 81 in Rushojwa, Rukungiri, on March 30 and 55 in Buziga, Kampala on April 27.

The Uganda government is yet to give an official explanation of the events that led to the cult deaths. A promised inquiry is yet to begin while police are still searching for cult members who escaped the inferno.

Kibwetere's movement aimed at obeying the Ten Commandments and preaching the word of Jesus Christ. The believers are said to have lived mostly in silence, occasionally using signs to communicate. Questions would be sent to Mwerinde in writing. Known as "the programmer", she is said to have been the mastermind behind how the establishment ran and would write back with answers.

For many of the believers, Kibwetere's group offered prayer and a sense of belonging. The self-sustaining community would take in whole families, providing for their every need. The members grew their own food, ran schools, and used their skills to contribute labour. What turned ordinary members of society into murderous cult leaders is still not clear.

Before his phantoms, Kibwetere had been a successful man, and a regular member of the Roman Catholic community. Both political local leaders were aware of the cults' activity, but no action was taken against them.

In April 2000, Interpol issued notices for the arrest of six cult leaders, it is still not known if any of them died in the fire or whether they are living in hiding. A 2014 Uganda police report indicated that Kibwetere may have fled the country. But others doubt that he was well enough to do this.

According to the BBC, Two decades on, the 48-acre plot at Kanungu is now being used as a tea plantation, but local businessman Benon Byaruhanga says he has plans to turn parts of it into a memorial. So far, the dead at Kanungu have never been officially remembered even when they have petitioned Parliament for compensation when it came to the orphaned children.

Survivors and witnesses of the inferno through different media accounts talk about how the faithful had been drawn by the charismatic leaders Credonia Mwerinde, a former bartender and sex worker, and ex-government employee Joseph Kibwetere, who said that they had had visions of the Virgin Mary in the 1980s.

Kanungu like many places in Western Uganda is full green hills and deep valleys, covered in small farms broken up by homesteads. The remains of those burnt were buried in mass grave, the cause of the killings takes on many speculations' borderline myths.

About Kibwetere, Mwerinde and Fr Dominic Kataribabo- Cult leaders

- Kibwetere is regarded as the founder of the cult and was addressed as Omukuru w'entumwa (chief apostle/prophet).
- Born in Ruguma, in Kajara county in western Uganda, he was trained as a primary school teacher at St George's Teachers College, Ibanda.
- He taught in various schools and was a headmaster and supervisor of Catholic schools in 1962.
- Joined Uganda's civil service before retiring to pursue politics. He did not distinguish himself in the Democratic Party and later opted to run a bar in Kabale.
- At one point, he is said to have developed a "mental problem" and claimed to have died and been resurrected. He was treated at Butabika Psychiatric Hospital.
- "Joseph Kibwetere became very faithful to the Movement oath of silence Whenever he was consulted, he would put his response in writing or use sign language. Most local people rarely saw him," say the research report.
- In 1990, Kibwetere officially launched the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God. At first, the cult was headquartered at his home in Ntungamo district, with 27 followers. Later, it was moved to Kakoba, Mbarara.
- Against opposition from the mainstream Catholic church, the cult moved in 1993 to Kanungu, after Kibwetere visited Mwerinde's home and liked the area. Mwerinde's ailing father, Paul Kashaku, donated 10 acres of land to the cult.

- The same year, it was registered as a religious NGO and was permitted by the Uganda government to carry out its activities throughout the country.

About Mwerinde

- Mwerinde claimed to talk directly with the Virgin Mary and was the co-ordinator of all activities at the movement's camps.
- She claimed that she had to consult with the Virgin Mary. Her word was usually final and binding. "Aptly, she was popularly referred to as the 'programmer.'"
- Born in Kanungu in 1952, her father was a retired Catholic catechist.
- She dropped out of primary school after her family refused to support her education.
- She moved to Kanungu trading centre, where she reportedly "got involved with men" and had four children, of whom only two are still alive.

About Fr Dominic Kataribabo

- Fr Dominic Kataribabo was one of the "bishops" administering sacraments, teaching, leading worship and related religious functions.
- Born in Bushenyi, Kataribabo was educated in Katabi and Katigondo seminaries and was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1965.
- From 1974 to 1977, he studied history at Makerere University before proceeding to Loyola University, Mt Carmel, California, between 1985 and 1987, obtaining a master's degree in religious studies.
- Before joining the cult, he served as Rector at Katabi seminary and Diocesan Youth Chaplain in Mbarara.

About the cult Activities

- Men and women were separated, except for Kibwetere and Mwerinde.
- Sexual intercourse between members, including married couples, was forbidden.
- A rigid timetable was followed with Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays as days of fasting, which started with prayers called "The Way of the Cross" from 3am to 5am. From 5am to 7am, members would go back to sleep. Upon waking up, they would work till 1pm. followed by another prayer session until 2pm.
- Free time was 3pm to 4pm and thereafter, there would be more work followed by supper at 8.00 pm and night prayers at 11pm.
- On non-fasting days, the schedule was basically the same, but members had to clean the compound before breakfast. They also held a short prayer, the Angelus, from 12pm to 3pm. "Lunch was usually light and could be a piece of sugarcane or a cup of porridge. Supper was better qualitatively," says the study. Members were taught that light meals were part of sacrifice. But their leaders enjoyed lavish meals, which included meat, on a regular basis.
- Members lived a life of prayer and meditation. Sunday was a 'Day of the Lord' when no work or activity was permitted. During the week, however, it was "like a labour camp," the researchers say.
- Ordinary dress was prohibited. Members surrendered their clothes on entering the camp and were issued with uniforms black for recruits, green for those "who had seen the commandments" and green and white for "those who were ready to die in the ark."

- The uniforms featured long-sleeved robes reaching the ankles. Women covered their heads with veils of matching colours. Each member always wore their uniform, their clothing having been sold or given away. They lived a life of "sacrifice, penance and mortification."
- They were discouraged from sleeping on beds or mattresses and had only the thinnest of blankets. They were not allowed to wear shoes or sandals- except, of course the leaders.
- However, those who contributed more money lived in relatively better housing. The majority were poor and had to make do with mud and wattle huts.
- In 1997, the cult started a primary school, which was officially opened by District Commissioner Kita Gawera. Later, education authorities closed it down due to poor sanitation, low academic standards and violation of children's rights.
- To join, children paid out Ush 5,000. For youths, it was Ush8,000 while adults paid Ush25,000. The cult also operated two shops, in Kanungu and Katojo towns.
- The leaders wrote a sacred book -A Timely Message from Heaven, The End of the Present Times (1996), which detailed their philosophy. Members were told to read the book 20 times, after which they would receive anything they prayed for.
- "During baptism, the candidate would be shaved everywhere, and nails cut.
- Later the nails and hair would be burnt, and the ashes dissolved in tea or water which the candidate would drink. Part of the ash was mixed with the anointing oils and smeared over the candidate's body, after which he or she was considered clean."
- Members moved around with three rosaries -two worn around the neck, one facing the front and another the back. The third was carried around in the hand. At times, a fourth would be hidden under the garments.
- The cult was headquartered on a hillside on which stood a modern house for the leaders and two large dormitories for males and females respectively. There were two guest houses with receptions, kitchens, stores, a primary boarding school and an unfinished shrine. A cemetery, poultry project and dairy farm with 30 Friesian cows and fields of crops completed the set-up.
- The site where the group settled was locally called Katate but the cult renamed it Ishayuuriro rya Maria, meaning "where Mary comes to the rescue of the spiritually stranded." There were branches in Rutoma, Rubirizi and Rugazi, Kyaka, Kabarole and Buziga, Kampala.

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