

2003 Convention - Toronto, Canada

The first convention of Abanyakigezi, which was held in Toronto, Canada July 3-7, 2003, was a success on five counts. First, we exceeded the modest number of delegates that we had expected. Given the understandable fear of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome [SARS] and the difficulty of obtaining a visitor's visa to Canada.

Little did we realise that there were dozens of courageous Banyakigezi, together with some friends of Kigezi, who shared our vision and would come to Toronto to be part of the historic meeting.

Delegates came from Britain, Canada, Uganda and the USA. Even the Uganda government sent a delegation of five Banyakigezi - cabinet ministers Dr. Mondo Kagonyera, Brig. Jim Muhwezi and Hope Mwesigye, Brig. Kale Kayihura, and Robert Rutaagi of the National Medical Stores - who made valuable contributions to the dialogue.

Second, we undermined the ethnic, religious and political cleavages that have repeatedly polarised the community of Banyakigezi for the past five decades.

Bakiga, Bahororo, Bahima, Banyarwanda, Catholics, Protestants, Movementists and non-Movementists from Kigezi sat together in Toronto as one people with a common objective. Not once did our superficial cleavages detract us from our main objective.

Third, the entire convention maintained a very civil and friendly atmosphere that was conducive to healthy dialogue, strategic planning and okumanyana [networking.]

Though many of us were acutely aware of our political differences, and though some of us locked horns with members of the Uganda government delegation in passionate debate about contemporary Ugandan politics, we did so in a respectful and civil manner.

While the emotionally charged and potentially explosive issue of Bakigaphobia in Bunyoro and Toro raised the temperature of the debate, everyone maintained a very healthy respect for the rules of civil discourse and democratic dialogue.

Fourth, we honoured and celebrated the life and enormous work of Omugurusi Festo Karwemera, Kigezi's cultural leader and living library of our history and traditions.

We gave serious attention to the preservation and promotion of our culture and the socio-economic development of Kigezi. We resolved to set up an education fund to support education in Kigezi.

The purpose of this fund will be to support the introduction and dissemination of information technology in Kigezi; to provide laboratory equipment for our secondary schools; to support technical education; and to acquire textbooks and other reading materials for schools in Kigezi.

Fifth, we agreed that the success of the above tasks would require the collective efforts of Abanyakigezi all over the world. To that end we resolved to build a global organisation to be called the International Community of Banyakigezi [ICOB.]

A working group, led by Dr. Frank Byamugisha of the World Bank in Washington, D.C., was charged with the responsibility of transforming ICOB from dream to reality. Other members of the group were: Mr. Michael Akampurira [Kampala, Uganda], Ms. Beatrice Hamujuni-Smith [London, England], Mr. Nkunda

Kabateraine [Toronto, Ontario], Mr. Andrew Katarikawe [Denver, Colorado], Mr. Elvis Muhaabwa [Greenville, South Carolina] and Dr. Muniini K. Mulera [Toronto, Ontario.]

This group was informed in its efforts by a Rukiga proverb:
"Gatagata munonga gateebirwe wa beene mbeho."

Kigezi has sons and daughters all over the world working in leading schools, universities and hospitals, the World Bank, major commercial and investment banks, the United Nations, city, state and national governments, private business and industry, and other important organisations.

Abanyakigezi who met in Toronto represented a cross-section of gifted men and women from different professions. There were several medical doctors, a veterinary scientist, economists, management specialists, lawyers, information technology specialists, university teachers, engineers, business people, social workers and counsellors, Ph.D students, politicians, military officers, child care experts and development specialists. Above all, there were parents who had nurtured Banyakigezi under challenging circumstances.

Thus it did not make sense to us that with such talent and access to opportunities all over the globe, Kigezi should remain among the poorest of the poorest communities.

Kigezi's problem is not lack of resources but our inability to harness the enormous potential of the international community of Banyakigezi, including those living in Uganda.

The persistence of our rugged individualism that was once perfectly suited for life in the mountains before we entered the global community is at the heart of our underdevelopment. Such rugged

individualism may still serve the private interests of entrepreneurs, but it does not serve the collective interest of the community.

This individualism is manifest in our small remittances of dollars to our families to provide for their immediate needs. While commendable, such small individual remittances probably have a smaller impact than that which would be achieved by collective effort by Banyakigezi in the Diaspora to support projects that have the potential to uplift the larger community.

Kigezi's problem is also a lack of visionary political leadership willing to transcend divisions engendered by competitive politics. To our great peril, we have been eager to embrace the political agendas of Kampala-based politicians and the divisive interests of the church leaders. We have allowed secular and ecclesiastical politics to define our relationships and to deter us from serving our common interests as Banyakigezi.

While it is healthy that Banyakigezi continue to hold differences of political opinion and affiliation in local, national and international politics, it is very urgent that we redefine our priorities.

As children of a region that is steeped in poverty, poor academic achievement, a threat of cultural decay and terrible environmental degradation, we have good reason to join forces in a struggle for the survival of our community. We believe that it is possible for a Catholic and Protestant to join hands to support education Kigezi.

We believe that it is possible for Banyakigezi who support different political parties can, and must work together to lift the socio-economic conditions of all the people of Kigezi.

We strongly believe that it is possible for a Munyarwanda of Bufumbira, a Mukiga of Bushengyera and a Muhororo of Rujumbura to rise in solidarity to defend the human rights and citizenship of every Muniyakezi no matter where they are.

Above all, we believe that we Banyakezi who are privileged to hold well-paying jobs and other opportunities all over the world owe it to our homeland to share our financial, intellectual and technical resources with Kigezi.

It is an obligation really, for we are all beneficiaries of the sacrifice and visionary leadership of our elders and forebears who invested in our education in Kigezi