THE BAYUDAYA OF UGANDA

A portrait of an African Jewish Community

BY

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I. THE DEMOGRAPHY OF THE BAYUDAYA IN UGANDA

The centre of the Bayudaya community is in Gangama, about two miles north of Mbale, where its founder, Semei Kakungulu, lived and where his tomb and those of his sons, Yuda and Nimrod, are located. Nearby, on Nabogoya Hill, Kakungulu began to lay the foundations for a large synagogue but the building was not erected by the time of his death in 1928. Kakungulu stipulated that Nabogoya Hill should be reserved for the construction of the synagogue as well as a school for Bayudaya children. Eventually the community built its central synagogue, which also served as its main meeting place, on this hill. This synagogue is today called Moses Synagogue after Moses the Prophet.

Not far from the synagogue is the village of Namanyoni where many of the Bayudaya live, among them Samsoni Mugombe Israeli, their religious and secular leader. There is a small synagogue in the village where they pray on week-days.

There are about eight synagogues in the vicinity of Bugisu (where Moses Synagogue stands) and Busoga. The central synagogue in the Busoga district was built in Namutumba and headed by Zakayo Lwandi, a very old man who stayed with Kakungulu for many years.

According to Samsoni Mugombe Israeli, in Kakungulu's days the Bayudaya numbered about two thousand. After his death this figure steadily diminished, mainly because of weak leadership, organizational deficiencies and the development of dissension.

In 1962, when the author first visited Gangama, there were about 300 Bayudaya. In 1966 the community numbered approximately 500, some 250 men, 150 women and about 150 children. 420 Bayudaya

1) Luganda for Jews, "Ba" being the plural prefix. Singular, Muyudaya.
lived in and around Mbale and about eighty in Busoga. Some members of the community lived near Kampala.

The Bayudaya belonged to the Ganda who lived in the former Buganda kingdom. They followed Kakungulu to the Mbale region and under his leadership conquered and ruled Bugisu and Bukedi at the beginning of the twentieth century. They lived as tenants on Kakungulu's land. Rainfall was plentiful here and the land fertile. The majority of the Bayudaya depended on agriculture, growing mainly coffee, cotton and bananas. Their homes, like those in the surrounding villages, were constructed of earth-covered wooden frames. The rooms were plastered inside, and the structure was usually roofed with corrugated iron. Their economic condition, in Ugandan terms, was good.

II. THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE BAYUDAYA COMMUNITY

King Mtesa I (1856-1884) of Buganda introduced far-reaching religious, social and administrative reforms in his Kingdom. He was motivated by various factors. This shrewd king, eager for knowledge, strove to strengthen his kingdom by utilizing the superior technology that he discovered among the Arab traders and the Europeans who visited him. His foreign policy was to gain the friendship of the Sultan of Zanzibar and the support of the Arab traders; from these he hoped to obtain weapons to establish his authority over his neighbours and to prevent a possible Egyptian invasion from the north. This was one of the main reasons why he declared himself a Muslim and adopted some of the laws of Islam. This conversion brought about a drastic change in the traditional local religion and in the social customs of the Baganda.

Islam's penetration into Buganda indirectly helped the spread of Christianity. It struck at the roots of the established religion, and paved the way for a monotheistic faith. Although the first Christian missionaries in Uganda (Protestants from 1877 and the Catholics from 1879) were generally hostile to the Muslims and Islam, they admitted that the Muslim religion also had positive aspects and influences.

The establishment and ultimate triumph of Christianity over the indigenous religion and Islam were furthered in the early 1890s by the arrival in Uganda of the British and by their support of the Protestant missionaries. Captain F. J. D. Lugard and Captain J. R. Macdonald, representatives of the Imperial British East Africa Company, helped the Christians to rout the Muslims and to convert