

Gicanda: Remembering the last Queen of Rwanda

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Gicanda, the last queen of Rwanda, is described by those who knew her as a humble, friendly and generous lady



Rosalia Gicanda was the last Queen of Rwanda. She was killed on April 20, 1994.

Rosalie Gicanda, the last queen of Rwanda, is described by those who knew her as a humble, friendly and generous lady who always enthusiastically welcomed visitors to her home and shared whatever she had.

Even before the abolition of the monarchy, when she lived in the palace in the southern town of Nyanza with her husband, King Mutara III Rudahigwa, she was, to her acquaintances, a 'People's Queen'.

The poor and the rich, men and women, young and old all had a place in her heart, according to testimonies.

When the monarchy was abolished in the late 1950s, she was pushed out of the palace, but she is said to have remained accessible to the population.

Humble and generous

Born in 1928 in the eastern region of Buganza, now in Rwamagana District, Gicanda was the first born in a family of five children. Her father, Martin Gatsinzi, and mother Mukwindigiri later relocated to Mutara area.

Available information indicates that when she was about 14, Gicanda married King Mutara III Rudahigwa, who passed on in 1959 shortly before the country gained independence from Belgium.

While at the palace, Gicanda is said to have been a "humble, generous and loving mother" for the many individuals who served the king and those who lived in the palace's neighbourhood.

From time to time, people would come at the Palace looking for her.

"She would always instruct her servants to let them in," says Charles Rubamburamanzi, 67, her brother, who spent some years at the palace.

"She would serve milk to any visitor without discrimination. Some people even used to come to the palace only because of her welcoming character. She was accessible to all. She was a queen for the masses."

Protais Mutembe, 82, who knew the queen for many years, described her as "a real [Rwandan] woman".

"She respected everyone and was loved by everyone," said Mutembe, a veteran lawyer.

Even after the abolition of the monarchy, Queen Gicanda remained a revered and loved figure in Nyanza, according to Mutembe.

That she continued to be the darling of the masses might have been the reason for her 'expulsion' from the palace around 1962 and her forced relocation to Butare town where she lived with her ailing mother

in a modest house until she was killed during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

But even in Butare, she remained popular although she avoided politics and lived with discreet dignity.

“People continued to visit her en masse,” Mutembe says.

First to be killed

At the time mass killings erupted throughout the country in 1994, Butare Prefecture remained unscathed, but the calm lasted a mere fortnight.

On April 19, interim president Theodore Sindikubwabo arrived in Butare where delivered his infamous speech, condemning those who were not “working” (read killing the Tutsi) and instructed them to “get out of their comfort zones and work.”

Killings started the following day.

On April 20, at around 11am, a detachment of soldiers commanded by 2nd Lt. Pierre Bizimana invaded the home of Queen Gicanda where they abducted her and six others but left behind her bedridden mother.

They took Gicanda and the others behind the Ethnographic Museum where they were killed.

She was among the first individuals to be killed in Butare and her murder signalled the beginning of the mass killing in the area, according to testimonies.

It is alleged that Queen Gicanda was executed under the orders of Capt. Idelphonse Nizeyimana, the head of intelligence and military operations at an elite military training school, Ecole Superiere des Sous-Officiers.

The soldiers later returned to loot property at her home.

Queen Gicanda’s remains were buried in the backyard of her house before being moved to Mwima hill in Nyanza, her final resting place next to the tomb of her husband.

Every year on April 20, relatives, friends and family gather at her tomb to pay their respects.

Legacy

News of the Queen’s death spread like wild fire and left the Tutsi in Butare terrified.

Her youngest brother, Rubamburamanzi, who had fled the country years before, says he learnt of the death through a friend two days after she was murdered.

“I was shocked. Only God will reward her for what she did for the people of Rwanda. She taught me to always be humble, love everyone without any distinction or discrimination, respect everyone and fight injustice,” Rubamburamanzi said.

Capt. Nizeyimana: The Queen’s killer

In 2012, the International Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) handed him a life sentence after finding him guilty of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes-crimes that were all committed in the former Butare prefecture.

He was particularly found guilty of ordering the killing of thousands, including Queen Rosalie Gicanda.

Nicknamed the “Butcher of Butare”, Nizeyimana was arrested in Uganda in 2009 and is the last member of the former Rwandan army to be tried by the UN court.

Nizeyimana was born in the former western prefecture of Gisenyi in 1963 - the same area as the former president Juvenal Habyarimana.

At the time of the Genocide against Tutsi in 1994, he held the rank of Captain in the former government forces and was the second-in-command of ESO.

On his part, Bizimana was in 1998 found guilty and sentenced to death by a military court in Kigali for his role in the Genocide and the murder of Queen Gicanda. The sentence was later commuted to life in prison after Rwanda abolished the death penalty.