

## The Uganda Martyrs

See? I told you I would find some stamps to illustrate my narrative. These are from Vatican City, issued in 1965 to commemorate the canonization of the 22 “Uganda Martyrs.” On their grisly fate hangs a harrowing tale of cruelty, violence, predation in east Africa in the 1880s — and from the perspective of today, multiple ironies.

The stamps at right show a number of young men and boys, some of them in the presence of older men in priestly robes. These were among the victims of Buganda’s King Mwanga after they allegedly resisted his sexual advances.



Here’s an old photograph of the poor guys. I guess they are numbered for identification purposes. Don’t know why the youngster on the left has a white halo over his head.

It’s a tangled story, involving tribal custom, political infighting and indigenous resistance to both Christian missionaries and British imperialists. For generations, traditional rule in Buganda invested the Kabaka, or king, with absolute power over life and death.

The law of the land required complete obedience to the Kabaka from his subjects. One of Mwanga’s demands was sexual submission to the ruler. (For the record, Mwanga had at least 16 wives and fathered 11 children.) One could argue that Mwanga was no more ruthless than his predecessors, including his father Mutesa, who ruled



Kabaka Mwanga

from 1856 to his death in 1884.

By the 1880s, Catholic and Protestant missionaries were converting significant numbers of Bugandans to Christianity, encroaching on the turf of Muslims and indigenous spiritual leaders. For years, the wily Mutesa played off the groups against each other, but young Mwanga saw the missionaries' success as a humiliating threat to his rule. He ordered the execution of Anglican Bishop James Hannington in 1885. Egged on by tribal chiefs who harbored grudges of their own, Mwanga subjected his pages to a test by demanding they submit to his sexual advances. When they resisted, backed by their guardians, Mwanga faced a direct challenge to his royal authority. The first to be executed in 1886 was Joseph Mukasa, a traditional leader who converted to Christianity and attempted to protect the pages (he's the one holding the holy book in the blue stamp from Vatican City, above). Then came the horrific punishment of the pages, who were burned alive. Most of those killed were between 15 and 30, though more than one was a pre-teen.

The reaction in religious circles locally and back in England was immediate. Some argued these despicable deeds exposed the futility of the missionary project in Africa. Others doubled down on the imperial mission. The Times of London opined that "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church," and continued: "On the success of the Uganda experiment ... depends the happiness of the interior of the vast continent for generations."

By 1888, Mwanga had been deposed by a coalition of Christians and Muslims. But he was back in power a year later, borrowing his father's trick of playing off Christians, Muslims, British and Germans. He clung to power until 1897, when the British drove him into German East Africa, where he was promptly arrested. He escaped and confronted the British once more, to no avail. In 1899 he was exiled to the Seychelles Islands, where he reportedly was tortured and starved. He died circa 1903, aged just 35.



Here's a particularly macabre bit of Christian hagiography





Pope Paul VI poses before a mural of the Uganda Martyrs in this stamp commemorating the pope's visit to Uganda in 1969.

The canonization process for the Uganda Martyrs began in 1920, culminating in the declaration of sainthood by Pope Paul VI in 1964.

It should be noted that this story is compiled mainly (but not wholly) from colonial/imperial sources, as aggregated by Wikipedia. One African historian notes, "Mwanga ... should be judged within the context



Pope Francis visited Uganda in 2015 and held a Mass for the Uganda Martyrs.

of 19th century Buganda, where kings had absolute executive, legislative, judicial, military and even economic power. To see him through the lenses of



A bit more Christian hagiography

his foes, those who took away the sovereignty of his

country and their local collaborators, is to miss him. He cannot be understood through the fairy tales of his enemies who denounced him."

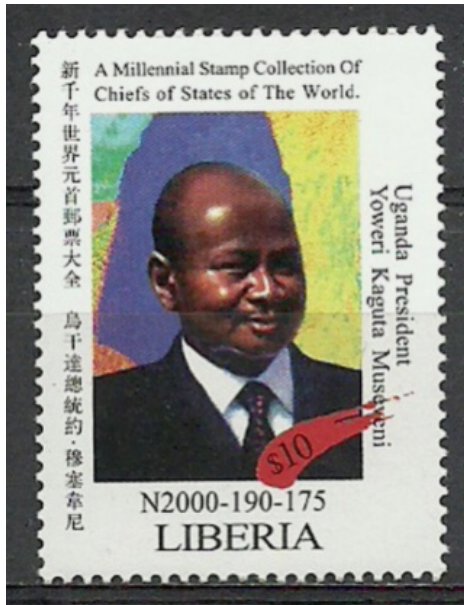
Which brings us to the ironies inherent in this tale. It should be noted that after King Mwanga's heinous crimes, the British, Germans, Muslims, missionaries and others went right on dealing with him over the next decade. Scrambling for Africa, you know.

Irony 1: The boys were canonized by the Catholic Church for resisting unto death the sexual demands of their indigenous king. This is the same Catholic Church where, it turns out, sexual abuse of boys was not uncommon. Some recent numbers:

- In Illinois, 451 clergy sexually abused 2,000 children since 1950.
- In Pennsylvania, 300 priests abused 1,000 children.
- In Maryland, the numbers are 150 priests, 600 children.

(source: The Washington Post, 6/14/23)

Irony 2: Mwanga's descendants still matter. Grandson Kabaka Mutessa II served as the first president of independent Uganda, from 1962 until he was deposed in 1966 in a coup led by Milton Obote. Another grandson, Prince Alexander David Ssimbwa, was part of the resistance to Obote that brought to power Yoweri Museveni. Kabaka Mutebi, current King of traditional Buganda, is Mwanga's great-grandson.



Uganda's ruler Yoweri Museveni

Irony 3: Yoweri Museveni, who has become an autocratic ruler after decades in power, heads a corrupt regime that has outlawed homosexuality. Under the new law, homosexuals face severe punishment, including life in prison; those who have sex with minors could be executed. Museveni claims homosexuality is a result of imperialist corruption. Yet his nation's pre-colonial royal family — whose descendants now include his allies — traces back to King Mwanga, whose sexual predations were not imported by the British. Members of that royal family continue to be prominent in Buganda/Uganda, which leads to ...

The crowning irony: There has been a remarkable social inversion in Uganda over the past century. Today, King Mwanga would be subject to the death penalty in his own country, which is 84.4 percent Christian. Polls suggest most Ugandans are homophobic. A society that once countenanced its ruler's sexual abuse and slaughter of young men and boys, has become a society where homosexuality is a crime punishable by death.

## THE FMF STAMP PROJECT CONTINUES