

DRAFT KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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BOLD IDEAS NEED SYSTEM SUPPORT TO THRIVE; THE CASE OF SARAH NYENDWOHA NTIRO

**DELIVERED AS PART OF THE LECTURE SERIES
CELEBRATING MAKERERE UNIVERSITY AT 100 YEARS**

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- The Chairperson and Members of the University Council
- Members of the Family of the Late Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro
- The Vice Chancellor Prof. Barnabas Nawangwe and Members of the University Management
- Distinguished panelists
- Members of Makerere University Staff
- Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is my distinctive honour and pleasure to join you all at my alma mater this afternoon as we celebrate the life of my contemporary, a trailblazer, distinguished scholar and selfless member of society, the late Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro. I wish to thank the Chairperson of Council, the Vice Chancellor and all previous speakers for their kind words in respect of my humble contribution to society. Thank you ever so much.

I am particularly pleased that the leadership of Makerere has, as part of the University's centennial celebrations found it fit to celebrate the legacy of Sarah Ntiro, whose life is a reflection of how far we have come along the journey of securing equitable access to education for the girl child. I thank God whose grace and loving-kindness has preserved me all my days, and enabled me to join you today for this wonderful celebration of a selflessness and bravery of Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro.

I therefore thank the Chairperson of Council and organizers of this public lecture for all the tireless efforts that they have invested in ensuring that we have a memorable afternoon. I equally recognise the presence of members of the late Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro family and thank each and every one of you for sparing time to be a part of this event.

Ladies and gentlemen, you will agree with me that the few hours we have to share our thoughts on Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro are insufficient. Be that as it may, it is my hope that the few minutes I have to present my remarks as well as the proceeding panel discussion will shed more light on what we, as individuals, employees, institutions, leaders and members can do to emulate the work of Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro, and beyond that, complete what still remains undone.

I will therefore deliver my address under four sub-themes; i) the cultural and ii) colonial government contexts in which Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro went to school, iii) what Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro would do or say in the present day and iv) my thoughts on how we can accomplish what remains undone.

i) The cultural context

The era in which Sarah Ntiro and I sought to enroll in formal education may to a great extent be described as being hostile to the girl child. Girls back then were expected to grow up taking care of their parents and siblings and upon getting married, their husband and children. In Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro's case however, fate seemed to constantly be smiling down on her, as if to prove that she was destined for greatness.

In 1911, fourteen years before Sarah Ntiro was born, the Church Missionary Society established Duhaga High School¹. According to the Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB), this period coincided with another great trailblazer, Florence Spetume Njangali. Born in Hoima in 1908, Njangali was a pioneer student of Duhaga Girls' Boarding School in 1920, who would later be appointed teacher in 1928 and headmistress in 1938. The DACB said of Njangali,

*Her vision was to see Duhaga Girls' Boarding School give its best to the people of Uganda. Hoima church leaders supported Njangali and proudly followed her lead in the role she played in the larger life of the school.*²

From this account, we see that Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro's birth into a household where both parents were teachers and early education at Duhaga Girls' School intersected with the ambitions of a teacher whose vision for her school transcended meeting the education needs of the immediate community. Her passion for education was so great that it rubbed off the church leaders and possibly inspired the young Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro to aim for the moon.

Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro attended Duhaga Girls' School for her kindergarten up until Primary 4 when her father took her to King's College Budo in 1938. She attended Primary 5 and Primary 6 and sat for her Primary Leaving Examinations at Budo Junior School before proceeding to King's College Budo for her Junior 1 to Junior Three, and finally Senior 4 to Senior 6, which she completed in 1945.

¹ The Introduction & Development of Western Education in Uganda 1877–1925 Available at: <http://www.nzdl.org/>

² DACB Oral History Uganda Booklet Kampala. Available at: <https://dacb.org/resources/oral-history/>

ii) The colonial government context

Let me give you the structure of the education system between 1898 and 1925. It consisted of five types of schools;

1. Catechist schools – which were the majority – run by Ugandan catechists and local chiefs for people seeking to be baptized,
2. Village schools – also referred to as bush, subgrade or reading schools – under the management of a Ugandan teacher,
3. Vernacular schools – at parish level or Mission posts run by two or three European missionaries for classes one to four,
4. Central schools – at particular parishes headed by European missionaries for classes one to six, and
5. High schools – were boarding junior schools originally for children of Chiefs, clan heads and clergymen but by 1925 could be joined by children of peasants on recommendation by chiefs, clan heads and Missionaries.

Duhaga Girls' School in Hoima that Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro attended could be classified as a Central School.

And whereas the Christian Missionaries were in charge of setting up and running schools in this period, the British colonial government was not committed to this duty, let alone financing them. The Missionaries financed the schools they founded with the help of Ugandans and friends back home in Europe. The attitude of the protectorate government then towards Uganda's education is perhaps best summed up in a 1901 quote by the Secretary to the Foreign Office in London. It reads:

Education is certainly our business in the last resort, but if the Missionaries will do it for us, it would be better to give them the facilities in the form of tax rebate

However, this stance would in the decades that followed be reversed. By 1920 the protectorate government that was hitherto primarily preoccupied with establishing its administration and quelling opposition to it from various rulers such as Omukama Kabalega, Kabaka Mwanga and Chief Awich had been forced to offer financial assistance to Missionaries engaged in educational work.

One of the most outstanding reasons for this compulsion was the fear by the protectorate government that the sons of chiefs who were increasingly being sent to Britain, the United States of America and India for further studies after High School would be influenced by various movements and cease to respect British officials upon their return back home.³

In 1924, the colonial government sent the Phelps-Stokes Commission to review education. Upon completion, they recommended that the government should take part in financing education. This is the first commission that brought the protectorate government into education, by financing the missionaries to do the work for them. This same commission introduced classification of Education from Primary 1 to 6, Junior 1 to 3 and Senior 4 to 6.

Sarah Ntiro's birth in 1925 coincided with the establishment of the Department of Education by the British colonial government. Its first Director Eric Hussey and his Officers worked in cooperation with the Missionaries who continued to administer the old schools and establish new ones. The Department's purpose was to strengthen education by laying down common syllabi and examination regulations and the certification of candidates, which expertise the Missionaries lacked.⁴

³ The Introduction & Development of Western Education in Uganda 1877–1925. Available at: <http://www.nzdl.org/>

⁴ Church and State in Education 1925 – 1962. Available at: <http://www.nzdl.org/>

Despite the above measures by the colonial government aimed at addressing financing of education, access for girls remained restricted to a great extent. For example, the concept note for today's lecture shares that the University of Oxford where Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro pursued her Bachelor of Arts in History awarded degrees to her first female graduands on 7th October 1920. Why did it have to take over eight centuries for the University of Oxford, an institution founded in 1096 to award its degrees to the first female graduands? Well, the writing's literally on the wall in the first part today's theme: **Bold Ideas Need System Support to Thrive**. Without system support, our bold ideas in respect of girl child education or any other cause may never gain the traction needed to cause far-reaching impact.

A good illustration of this is the relentless effort that it took to get the pioneer six female students of Makerere College to get admitted. Female missionaries in particular Mary Stuart who had prior to coming to Uganda advocated for women's education in England not only raised funds but also lobbied for women's admission into Makerere College.⁵

Mary Stuart was the wife of Bishop Simon Cyril Edgar Stuart, the Third Bishop of the Diocese of Uganda from 1932-1952. Her position as the Bishop's wife meant that there was no door she couldn't knock upon to persuade the protectorate government to admit girls to Makerere College. From the Governor to Officers of the protectorate government, no one was beyond her reach.

Mary Stuart would later be joined by Margaret Graham from Oxford, who had been appointed as Warden for girls at Makerere College.

⁵ Tripp, A. M. (2004). A New Look at Colonial Women: British Teachers and Activists in Uganda, 1898-1962. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines*, 38(1), 123-156. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4107270>

However, upon arrival in Uganda, she found that the protectorate government had changed their minds about admitting girls and she was instead posted as lecturer in the Department of Education.

The excuse by the protectorate government was that there was only one girl at King's College Budo who had qualified to enter Makerere College, and that was none other than Catherine Senkatuka, the mother of Dr. Alan Shonubi the lawyer. Faced with this predicament, Mary Stuart and Margaret Graham embarked on a campaign throughout Uganda and onto Keynay, Tanganyika and Zanzibar, in order to persuade bright young female teachers to attempt Makerere College's special entry exams. Four of these teachers passed the entry exam and were joined by another bright girl who came directly from King's College Budo, adding six girls to the one hundred and sixty-six men admitted in 1945.⁶

Margaret Graham often told us during our interactions that beyond persuading the protectorate government, Mary Stuart persuaded women of the Mothers Union around Namirembe to write to the Governor of Uganda. Despite their little education and broken English, these women went ahead and wrote to the Governor, petitioning him to admit their daughters to Makerere College. One of the women Mary Stuart persuaded was Mrs. Senkatuka, the mother of Catherine Senkatuka and Mary Senkatuka, who later became the first female Permanent Secretary in Uganda.

When Mary Stuart, Margaret Graham and the lady activists next interacted with the protectorate government they were armed with the list of six girls who qualified to join Makerere College, leaving the officials no choice but to bow to the pressure and let them in.

⁶ [A New Look at Colonial Women: British Teachers and Activists in Uganda, 1898-1962 on JSTOR](#)

When I came to Makerere in 1953, Margaret Graham was the Warden of the girls who resided in what is now the Makerere University Guest House. We were only thirteen girls in Makerere at that time. The Warden's house was a wooden structure adjacent to the Guest House and so the boys nicknamed it "Box" because all boxes in that period were made of wood.

Towards the end of 1953, Mary Stuart Hall was completed and named after Bishop Stuart's wife, who had worked hard for the betterment of women education during her time in Uganda. When we moved into the new Mary Stuart Hall, the thirteen of us could only fill the first and second floors. The third floor was left unoccupied. However, by the time I left Makerere, there were 50 girls and so the third floor got occupied.

Our warden, Margaret Graham often gathered us in the evenings and told us about her struggle with Mary Stuart to persuade the protectorate government to admit girls to Makerere College. We were always motivated by these talks which helped us to better appreciate these ladies' selfless acts.

This brings me to the third part of my address.

iii) What would Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro do or say in the present day?

Makerere has taken a number of commendable steps in as far as creating system support for bold ideas to thrive is concerned. Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro would be very proud of;

1. The 1990 implementation of the Makerere University affirmative action in favour of female applicants (known as the 1.5 points scheme) to increase the number of female students admitted,

2. The 2019 approval of the Affirmative Action Policy providing for a 40 percent enrollment quota for female students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM),
3. The 2019 amendment of Policy and Regulations against Sexual Harassment and launch of the Vice Chancellor's Standing Roster of 100 to investigate complaints reported by students and staff, and
4. The 2021 move by the Makerere University Council to double the number of awards under the Female Scholarship Initiative from 20 to 40,

The above advancements notwithstanding, Sarah Ntiro would still advocate for;

1. An analysis of the impact of the 1.5 points affirmative action scheme over 30 years since and any remedial action that needs to be taken to help the boy child
2. A comprehensive evaluation of barriers to the full utilization of the 40 percent enrollment quota for females in STEM and creation of mentorship networks of male and female staff as well as alumni to address these through aggressive knowledge transfer activities at secondary and primary education levels.
3. Use of feedback from the Vice Chancellor's Standing Roster of 100 to intensify sensitization campaigns and reduce the knowledge gaps on Gender-Based Violence, abuse, and sexual Harassment that exist among staff and students as well as the wider University community.
4. The need to increase the number of grants under the Female Scholarship Initiative to at least 100 with the extra funding solicited from Makerere's hundreds of thousands of alumni spread across the globe.

One thing I would like to say at this point is that Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro was very articulate. When I was returning from my further studies in the United States, I was invited by Sarah who was then the wife to the High Commissioner of Tanganyika to Britain to stay with her. During that time, she had appeared on either Radio or Television, I don't quite recall, with the Archbishop of Canterbury and when asked what part of Tanganyika she came from, her response was, "I am a Ugandan", and the Uganda High Commission was flooded with congratulatory letters for having produced such a beautiful and articulate lady like Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro who could appear with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Of course, Tanganyika was very envious but the fact was that although she spoke softly, Sarah was very articulate.

One attribute I would want to put to her is that she is the one who pushed me into being a fighter for women. When I stood up to give my maiden speech in the Legislative Council, the Kyabazinga Nadiope of Busoga who was the father of a friend we were at Makerere with put his arm around me and said, "my daughter, you spoke like a man!" I felt very insulted by and I did tell Sarah who was also a Member of the Legislative Council then.

In response, Sarah told me, "I will take you to where women meet and talk about themselves." She introduced me to the Uganda Council of Women. Whereas it had started before, I had never joined it. In my biography titled "It's a Pity She's Not a Boy!" I say that's when my fighting for women started.

iv) My thoughts on how we can accomplish what remains undone

The holy scriptures in the book of Proverbs chapter twenty-eight verse one state that “*The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion.*”

The attribution of boldness to one’s awareness of his or her right standing with God and man is a good point on upon which to reflect on Sarah Ntiro’s life.

When the colonial Government attempted to pay her less than her male counterparts with the same academic qualifications as she had, she rejected the salary and decided to teach without pay. So impactful was her protest that Ms. Anne Cohen, the Governor’s wife heard of it, and intervened. The issue was pursued and she was permitted to receive a salary equal to that of her male counterparts, setting a precedent that stood for the rest of her life.⁷

Whereas bold ideas thrive under the appropriate system support, new ones can also be stifled when the system does not evolve to meet changing trends. In this respect, financing of public institutions such as schools and universities and the various projects therein needs to be re-examined with the aim of enabling them to develop their land resources or undertake various investments in infrastructure within the tenets enabling laws and clear arbitration mechanisms.

The proliferation of technology has made communication much easier and less expensive than it was a decade ago. This has led to limitless forms of expression, although not all of them are beneficial.

⁷ Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro: A champion of women’s rights. Available at <https://www.newvision.co.ug/>

And whereas it is much easier to share our bold ideas, our society and the youth in particular need to be helped to distinguish between what is bold and what is utopian. All advances in the use of technology and communication ought to be viewed through the lens of African culture that prizes courtesy, decency, respect for others, living within our means and other values above all that our globalized setting attempts to deem as good or acceptable.

Conclusion

The life and legacy of Sarah Ntiro offer a sound point of reflection on how the alignment of bold ideas and systems that support them can lead to enormous impact whose effects reverberate through generations. We have also witnessed that although it is not the guarantee of a lifetime of personal and professional achievements, the role of supportive parents and their influence on early childhood development cannot be overlooked, especially in the face of prevalent marginalization by both culture and state.

Furthermore, bold ideas can never really have meaningful national impact unless they are undergirded by the right policy environment. Enactments of good policies pave way for individuals and non-government agencies with resources to invest in various sectors, which in turn boost the overall wellbeing of the population.

Be that as it may, Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro also faced a number of challenges in the expression of her bold ideas. Whereas she had excelled in Mathematics at King's College Budo, her choice to study Mathematics as the only female in a class of 32 was cut short when the lecturer walked out of the class due to her presence. She eventually left the class out of consideration for her male colleagues, a true act of sacrifice.

Secondly, her admission to the University of Oxford was not plain sailing. She had to struggle to get in by studying Latin as a second language in addition to English, in order to fulfill one of the strict entry requirements. As fate would have it, Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro had secured a teaching position at Kyebambe Girls School in Fort Portal after graduating from Makerere in 1950. With her acceptance to the University of Oxford hanging in the balance, she studied Latin alongside the clergy while continuing to teach her classes.

Upon completion of her Latin classes, she attempted the proficiency test at the St. Mary's Seminary Virika in Fort Portal and having passed, was admitted to St. Anne's College, University of Oxford.

When I joined Makerere in 1953, we were often regaled by our Warden's tales of Sarah Nyendwoha. Upon return from Oxford in 1954 with a degree, she was the blue-eyed girl of the protectorate government, and the Governor in particular. She was worshipped everywhere she went. So profound was her impact on Governor Cohen that he opens his book with praises of Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro. At the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of Gayaza High School, there was a pageant and when Sarah came into the venue driving a tractor, Governor Cohen said "this act heralded a new era of Education in Uganda."

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, it would be unfair of me to conclude my remarks without mention of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), an organization started by African Women Ministers who attended the World Conference on Education for all in Jomtien, Thailand in 1991. At the end of the Conference, we all held hands and promised that would start Universal Primary Education (UPE) by the year 2000.

As the Deputy Minister for Primary Education then, I led the Ugandan delegation and our belief in starting FAWE was to uplift the women in decision-making positions and enable them to make a significant difference.

Later when we started FAWE Uganda, we chose Sarah Nyendwoha Ntiro as a befitting role model for the Annual Lecture and Award for women who have worked to facilitate girl-child education. I am happy that this initiative continues to mentor young girls and boys, award women of distinction and provide higher education scholarships. I look forward to hearing from the Executive Director of FAWE Uganda, whom I reliably informed will be one of the panelists in the discussion that will follow.

It is therefore my humble prayer that today's reflection on the life and legacy of Sarah Ntiro will inspire each and every one of us to put forth our bold ideas, provided they are righteous, or put in place the necessary system support that enables bold ideas to thrive.

I thank you.