

Upper Nile Press

REUBEN T. MUGERWA, AND NATHANIEL MUMBERE WALEMBA

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Nathaniel Mumbere Walemba, D.Min. (Andrews University, Berrien Spring, Michigan U.S.A.), retired in 2015 as executive secretary of the East-Central Africa Division (ECD) of Seventh-day Adventists. In retirement, he is assistant editor of this encyclopedia for ECD. A Ugandan by birth, Walemba has served the Seventh-day Adventist Church in many capacities having started as a teacher, a frontline pastor, and principal of Bugema Adventist College in Uganda. He has authored several magazine articles and a chapter, "The Experience of Salvation and Spiritualistic Manifestations," in Kwabena Donkor, ed. *The Church, Culture and Spirits* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2011), pp. 133-143. He is married to Ruth Kugonza and they have six children and fourteen grandchildren.

The name itself has overtones of Uganda's history. The process of partitioning East Africa was not an easy one. After the challenges that come with boundary demarcation, colonialists were faced with a difficulty of finding "neutral" appellation for the territories they had demarcated. The territory that was named Upper Nile included Uganda and Egyptian Sudan. The territory was charged with tribal sentiments, and the name was to render them innocuous because of its neutrality. As time went by, the political system in this territory came of age and moved away from the earliest "political" and social expectations. The rationale behind the name Upper Nile is what the founders of the publishing house wanted to emulate.¹

Developments that Led to the Establishment of the Publishing House

The Upper Nile Press was the brainchild of Russell Thomas, who was in charge of publishing work in the Afro-Mid-East Division in the 1970s, and Dennis Bazarra, a Ugandan who was the executive director of the East African Union Mission in Nairobi, Kenya.² Thomas discovered that the colporteur ministry was doing very well in Uganda, yet no publishing house existed. Since Uganda was in the East African Union Mission, it was served by the Africa Herald Publishing House, Kendu Bay, Kenya. However, there were factors that developed in Uganda that made colporteurs there perform exceptionally well when it came to selling books: a record that was maintained for a decade and half (1971-1986), and it meant Uganda needed its own publishing house.

The first reason was political tyranny during that time (1971-1978), and the second one was the civil war (1981-1986). The majority of the population found solace in religious activities and reading spiritual books. Many religious and spiritual books found ready buyers in anticipation of finding comfort in them. Literature evangelism grew stronger and expanded so much during a decade that it caught Russell Thomas' attention. However, Uganda did not have a publishing house. Pr. Balaam Kirya, who headed the Department of Publishing in the Uganda Field Mission, had to shuttle to African Herald Publishing House, Kendu Bay, Kenya, to carry boxes of books to Uganda for colporteurs to do their work. It was very risky for someone to cross the border to Kenya

frequently. One could have easily entered the government list of saboteurs.

In 1981 came a civil war that quickly became a guerrilla war. Ugandans endured five years (1981-1985) of chaos and death. During these terrible times, statistics show the increase in sales of the books was 50 percent with 350 colporteurs.³ The demand was too much for the African Herald, Kendu Bay, Kenya. Furthermore, there was a need for publications in indigenous languages, which African Herald, Kendu Bay, could not supply. Uganda needed its own Publishing House.

Founding and Development

In 1978, Russell Thomas and Dennis Bazarra introduced a motion to the East African Union Executive Committee for Uganda to start a publishing house in Uganda.⁴ The proximity of the capital city and the easy transport from Kireka Hill to other parts of Uganda acted as a catalyst to build the press on Kireka Hill.

Building activities started in 1985.⁵ The old equipment, which the Canadian Publishing Houses had discarded, arrived in Uganda at the end of 1984. The keeping of building materials and the donated machinery were entrusted to Pastor Balaam Kirya, the Publishing Department director of Central Uganda Field. Upper Nile Press was housed in one large building with a storage wing and a large room where printing activities take place. This included a reception area, the manager's office, and the financial controller's office. It had two large entrances: one in front and the other at the back. The building had a spacious attic where staff meetings took place. It was liberally ventilated. The sources⁶ are unanimous that funding predominantly came from donor countries like Canada, Western Europe, and the United States of America to a poorer country like Uganda which had been ravaged by tyranny and civil war for many years. Lastly, there was a little bit of subsidy from their mother Union of the East Africa Mission, Kenya.

In 1986, Ted Proud, a Canadian, came to install and service the machines and train the indigenous workers how to operate them. The machines were of the late sixties in model and edition. However, Ugandan Adventists thanked God for this equipment. Against this backdrop, the vision of the Upper Nile Press was expressed as "To print literature which will always honor the name of God." Along with the vision, Upper Nile Press's core values were: Client Centered; Trusting God and respectful to all humanity; Spiritually Focused; Performance Driven; and Team Oriented.

The Mission Statement read as follows: "Upper Nile endeavours to produce quality work and to foster good working relationship with our clients based on trustworthiness and sound Christian ethics guided by Seventh-day Adventist religious philosophy."

On May 4, 1987, the Upper Nile Press production officially started. The Press began to publish both in English and local languages, namely Luganda, Lunyoro/Lutooro, Lunyankole/Lukiga, Lango, and Acholi. Upper Nile Press soon published the following books: *Danieli ne Kisera Kyaffe*, *Katonda nga Ayanukula Ebibuzo*, *Obulamu bwebugagga*

, *Omusango Omukulu, Kiki Ekijja, Katonda Yaffa? Omusale Waffe, Better Living, Building a Happy Home, Lucifer's Files*, Sabbath School quarterlies, and, at a later date, Zzula (Discover) tracts.

The impacts of the publications of the Upper Nile Press in the first decade of its existence were good and impressive. According to the Quinquennium Report at the Session of 1990 that Pastor Balaam Kirya gave, the number of literature evangelists had increased from 350 to 500 over a period of five years. However, the management and the board began to face some serious challenges at the close of the 1990s and the dawning of the year 2000. The new management was put in place to avert the crisis. In preparing a Ten Year Strategic Plan (2004-2014), the management assessed the strengths and challenges of the Press. The strengths included the premises and the plant not being rented, recognition by the Church, stakeholders' support, the availability of the market, and access to Prime Radio for announcement and promotion. The main challenges stemmed from a lack of finances. Machines were very old and broke down often, and the Press suffered from a lack of access to the Internet and electric power fluctuations. Thus, the Upper Nile Press' Strategic Plan focused on finances, workers' training, and improving machinery and Internet access. The improvements have followed, as seen in the growth of publication. For example, in 2011, the total output of the vernacular and English Sabbath School quarterlies was 15,000. In 2021, the output of the vernacular and English Sabbath School quarterlies stood at 25,354.

Upper Nile Press continues to adapt to the changes in the publishing industry due to general access to electronic and Internet content.

Managers of Upper Nile Press

Ted Proud (1986-1988); Dennis Mercill (1989-1990); Russell Thomas, Jr. (1991-1994); Balaam Kirya from Uganda (1995-1999); Alfred Ssentenza (2000-2005); Reuben T. Mugerwa (2005-2007); Charles Kigongo (2008-2010); and David Byakuno (2011-)

NOTES

1. Balaam Kirya, interview by author, Kireka Hill, Kampala, Uganda, on April 5, 2023.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Christian Aliddeki, interview by author, Bugema Village, Luweero District, April 8, 2023.
5. Balaam Kirya, interview by author, Kireka Hill, Kampala, Uganda, on April 5, 2023.

6. Christian Aliddeki, interview by author, Bugema Village, Luweero District, April 8, 2023.

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