

The myth behind Sezibwa Falls' origin

Long ago, a woman named Tebatemwa gave birth to twins in form of rivers. Whereas one meandered to Bugerere, another remained in Mukono and was named Waswa Sezibwa, hence the origin of the falls

By Titus Kakembo

It is a picnic scene and the *mechomo* (roast meat) aroma is inviting. Smoke from huge *sigitis* (charcoal stoves) rises through the canopy of trees into the sky. Behind the *sigitis* are men and women roasting chicken, goat and mutton and beef. Shrieks of joy and pain from the birds complete the merry scene at Sezibwa Falls, 32km east of Kampala, in Mukono district.

However, this is not a picnic. The hundreds of local chicken, goats, sheep and bulls have just lost their lives as a sacrifice to the gods to answer the requests of many traditional practitioners who flock this place seeking divine intervention.

Gourds of local brew known as *mwenge bigele* compete with bottle wine during the occasion. The sacrificial animals are black or white. Phrases are muttered by men and women in husky tones with dry tea-coloured eyes and webbed palms rattles, shakers and drum beats climax to summon the 'powers' in the forest.

This is the mood at Sezibwa Falls, one of Uganda's tourist sites. As the festive season continues, many indigenous and foreign tourists will visit the falls. It will not be just for its scenic beauty, but also for the interesting legend behind its creation.

The 17th century legend is of a woman called Tebatemwa who became pregnant and when she went into labour, she gave birth to a gush of water that flowed into divergent twin streams. She was then called Nnalongo Tebatemwa.

According to Christopher Tenywa, a guide, the twins were born around the present-day Sezibwa Falls. One of them was named Kato Mubuye who meandered to Bugerere (Kayunga). The other one stayed in Mukono and was named Waswa Sezibwa.

The twin stream births shocked the community. "If Nalongo Tebatemwa had not existed, life would have been very different in Buganda," Tenywa says.

There are some Baganda who continue to pay homage to Sezibwa, which was declared a Buganda Kingdom heritage site some years ago. Oral literature passed on for generations has it that the Sezibwa



Sezibwa Falls is located in Mukono district

kind of birth has spiritual roots. Its name originates from a Luganda proverb, *Sizibirwa Kkubo* (I can't be blocked).

Another legend has it that there is still sibling rivalry between the mysterious "twins". Such is the

importance of these beliefs that natives have decided to conserve the vegetation and all that surrounds it. For instance, many of them still rely on local herbs such as *omululuza* for medicine and other related things.

A warm welcome



A foot bridge tourists use to cross the stream to Sezibwa Falls. Photos by Titus Kakembo

ACCESS POINT

Branching off the Kampala-Jinja highway, a bumpy and dusty murrum road leads from Kayanja trading centre to the falls. This short distance of 10km requires a strong vehicle to ply through the terrain, especially when it rains and becomes muddy. The rickety wooden old foot bridge enables quests to cross the stream. On one side is captivating green hill on which unpainted houses sit. In one house are tables and chairs. The setting looks like a restaurant abandoned after a bomb explosion.

At Sezibwa Falls, one will be warmly received not just by the people, but also by its scenic beauty.

The stream hangs seven metres high, while the sky and green foliage hug each other. The site has more than 120 species of birds, reptiles crickets as well as primates which pull comic faces. Monitor lizards, a variety of green snakes in different sizes, the cobra and even the rock python are a common sight.

The mysterious river sidles away with calm in some sections. It has

spots that are ideal for a family picnic, honeymoon, biking, fishing, rock climbing excavations, camping, bird-watching, community tours, nature walk and canoeing.

Bird-watching attracts crowds throughout the year.

For travellers coming from eastern Uganda to Kampala, a stopover at Sezibwa is ideal to think, write and appreciate nature's bounty. Even a blind man would love the sound of the waters hitting the rocks with a splash without seeing the stream.

A walk through the nearby tea estate is a thrill. Guests often visit homes and engage in food preparation, digging and mastering Kiganda greeting formalities. They also walk through the swamps besides enjoying farm tourism. It is an experience that remains engraved in the mind.

No accommodation

There is neither electricity nor accommodation at the site.

Tourists who prefer to spend nights there have to part with sh25,000 for a make-shift tent per night. Emma Mugizi, the public relations officer of the tourism ministry, revealed how private tourist sites must provide for themselves.

"The ministry does not offer financial support to private tourist sites. It caters for government-run sites only. However, the ministry helps in marketing those places and tourism as a whole," Mugizi reveals.

Sezibwa Falls is both a cultural site and Christian worshipping place. It is co-owned by Buganda kingdom and the Anglican Church. In 2001, it was acknowledged as a tourist site by Uganda Tourism Community Association.

The main focus was to make money for people around the area. In 2008, Sezibwa Falls Resort, a private entity, took up management of the site.

Despite not being very well developed, Sezibwa attracts both local and international tourists.

The entry fee to the site is sh3,000 for Ugandan tourists and sh10,000 for foreigners. However, this is only the entry fee, each activity carries its own cost. For instance, guided bird-watching is sh25,000 per person, while short guided nature walk costs sh15,000.

Folklore, common attractions to the site

Sezibwa Falls has been the home of several myths. One popular one is that the twin rivers sometimes change form and manifest as plants, reptiles, birds or mammals.

All this makes for interesting folklore, even though some people have expressed doubt about the veracity of the Sezibwa legend. For instance, when he visited Uganda in 2007, then British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, doubted the dramatic river formation theory. That though did not stop him from enjoying the green

vegetation and fresh breeze at Sezibwa Falls. He planted a mango tree to commemorate his visit to the pearl of Africa.

Ten years later, many tourists, especially from the UK pose for photographs next to the tree that has now grown.

The British premier is one of the many high-profile visitors that come to the site.

"We host world leaders of repute, devout Christians, businesspeople, school children and traditional medicine practitioners in equal volumes," Tenywa says.

Sezibwa is not only a place for sightseeing. It also is a one-stop healing centre for different personal problems.

"Love portions, fertility herbs and libido boosters are on high demand here," Tenywa explains. There are powers for job hunters, visa applicants and marriage opportunity specialists, he adds.

The theatrics here are also unending.

This writer witnessed John Kiku, a Sezibwa Falls regular visitor, get possessed by the 'spirits'.

He opened his eyes wide and climbed a tall tree. His breathing was laboured for a while, as he sweated profusely.

He confessed seeing the sun not penetrate the leaves as it always does. His ankles twisted painfully.

"He felt a sense of isolation. The trees had become silhouettes. The air was cold. Soon he felt his feet melt into nothingness.

"When I am in a trance I see rainbows, fireflies and wild animals. They connect me to the other world," Kiku says.