Residents resist development of Bunyonyi's Punishment Island

KABALE

By Job Namanya

Stakeholders in the tourism sector in Kigezi region have expressed concern about the encroachment on Lake Bunyonyi's Akampene (Punishment) Island by the former Rubanda West Member of Parliament aspirant, Mathias Robert Muhereza.

Residents and tour operators said the island, which has existed for long, bears the cultural heritage of the Banyakigezi and "should never be tampered with by anyone".

According to Drake Owoyesigire, a tour guide on the lake, Muhereza started developing the area to set up a tourism site a few weeks ago, allegedly without the knowledge of the locals and authorities in the area. When he was asked about the development, he is said to have accused the locals of attempting to sabotage his project.

"I was told about the encroachment on our prestigious island and, as a concerned tour operator, I tried to find out where the problem was coming from. My findings led me to Muhereza, who is currently putting up structures on the Island," Owoyesigire said.

He added that Muhereza, who claims to be a State House employee, is also fond of threatening residents.

"He later called me and threatened to hurt me if I continued calling for his eviction from the island. This island is our greatest source of tourism and we cannot risk losing it to individuals," Owoyesigire said.

Robert Bihega, a 59-year-old resident of Mugyera cell, Bufundi sub-county in Rubanda district, said he grew up listening to traditional stories about the island and it has been "virgin for so long".

He, therefore, was shocked to hear about someone trying to encroach on it.

"We need the Government to help us and ask Muhereza where he got the licence to occupy this island. I understand this island belongs to the entire community and should be preserved in its original form for people not to forget the story behind it," he said.

George Tukwasibwe, a motor-boat operator on the lake, expressed worry about the environmental consequences of the invasion of the island since it is too small to accommodate a standard tourism site.

"That island is too small to have toilets and other requirements. If he sets up a structure, it may result in sanitation challenges for our people," Tukwasibwe said.

Benson Kitabire, the Kabale district tourism officer, said as concerned stakeholders, they will not allow Muhereza to take over that island.

"We do not care who he is or what he does, but we want to see that land conserved for the good of the communities surrounding it because it bears profound history for Bakiga and Bafumbira," Kitabire said.

Eng. Ivan Batuma, the Kigezi Tourism Cluster chairperson, said Muhereza's action was illegal since he had not followed the rightful investment procedure on Lake Bunyonyi.

"This island is a national heritage, which attracts many tourists to our region. As a cluster, we have not been consulted by the developer to know if he is acting legally and we do not know his intentions," Batuma added.



The disputed Akampene Island on Lake Bunyonyi in Kabale district. Photo by Job Namanya

WHAT OTHERS SAY



Elsie Ahimbisibwe, tour guide: Our main business has been to tell tourists the story behind the island. It cannot be destroyed.



Edson Atuheire, resident: We shall not allow this island to be taken away, just like that.



Smith Ndeija, boat operator Our heritage is important for tourism to prosper in this region.

However, Muhereza said he was trying to preserve the island by modernising it for tourists and to ensure its continued existence.

"This is our land and we have a strong cultural bond with it. What I am doing is to develop it for generations to come. We need tourists, but they should be visiting something that has been developed," he said.

Muhereza denied allegations of threatening residents opposed to his move, saying some of them are being used by selfish investors to block the development.

Akampene Island, better known a the Punishment Island, has previously been deserted, save for one tall dead tree, a thick tangle of reeds and tal grass.

Its popularity stems from it notorious history, where girls from surrounding villages who were found to be pregnant out of wedlock would be taken, abandoned without food and left to die.

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