

Letters

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Janani Luwum and the Courage Uganda still needs



On February 15, 2025, speaking on *Mega FM's* Teyat Talk Show in Gulu, Northern Uganda Bishop Emeritus Binoni Ogwang reflected on the man who had recruited him into ministry decades earlier. He described Archbishop Janani Luwum as a man of quiet strength and unwavering conviction. Although he came from a traditional background, he carried rare spiritual steadiness. He was not loud. He was steady.

During that interview, Bishop Binoni recalled achievements that revealed Luwum's depth long before 1977. Together with Northern Uganda Bishop Emeritus Nelson Onono Onweng, he helped lead the translation of the Acholi Bible from Genesis to Revelation, a demanding three-year endeavour requiring discipline and scholarship. At his consecration as Bishop of Northern Uganda in Gulu on January 25, 1969, crowds filled and overflowed the grounds in what many still recall as the largest gathering ever witnessed at such a ceremony in the region. Among those present were President Milton Obote, Zambia's former president, and senior officials, including president Idi Amin, Internal Affairs minister Oboto Ofumbi and police chief Erinayo Oryema. This was not a marginal cleric who stumbled into history. He was already a moral force.

Eight years later, that quiet strength would be tested in the darkest chapter of Uganda's history.

On February 16, 1977, Archbishop Luwum did not walk into a meeting. He was arrested and taken before a regime that had already silenced thousands. Uganda was gripped by fear. Disappearances were common. Arbitrary arrests and detentions had become routine. Families searched for loved ones who never returned. Speaking out carried consequences.

What followed was not a credible judicial process but a staged appearance before power, a proceeding whose outcome had long been decided. That evening, the government announced that the archbishop had died in a car accident. Few believed it then, and few believe it today. Eyewitness testimony and subsequent historical investigations established that he had been shot after appearing before Amin and senior security officials. The attempt to disguise his killing only confirmed what many already knew: the rule of law had collapsed.

Yet in that darkness, Luwum refused silence. His courage was not theatrical defiance but moral conviction in a season when fear governed public life. As Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, he had publicly protested State killings and arbitrary arrests. Together with fellow church leaders, he delivered a formal protest letter condemning the regime's violence. At a time when many politicians, clergy, intellectuals and ordinary citizens had fled into exile, gone underground or retreated into survival silence, Luwum stood in the open. He refused to sanctify injustice with quiet compliance.

His murder shattered the illusion that fear could permanently sustain power. It exposed brutality beyond denial. International pressure intensified. Domestically, resistance hardened. His death became a moral indictment of dictatorship.

Today, memorials stand in his honour: a shrine at Wiigweng in Mucwini, Kitgum; Luwum Street in Kampala; Church House on Kampala Road, and a statue among modern martyrs at Westminster Abbey in London. His name has outlived his executioners. Given his place in Uganda's history, it is worth considering whether Entebbe International Airport should be renamed Janani Luwum International Airport (JLIA).

Nations are shaped not only by soldiers and presidents but by the moral courage of those who refuse to bless oppression. Every generation faces moments when fear tempts silence.

Nearly five decades later, Archbishop Luwum still confronts Uganda with a question: when the moment demands courage, will we speak, or will we be remembered for our silence?

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