

Called by God but Ordained by Men: The Work and Ministry of Reverend Florence Spetume Njangali in the Church of the Province of Uganda

Christopher Byaruhanga<sup>1</sup> [Professor of Historical Theology at Uganda Christian University].

[cbyaruhanga@ucu.ac.ug](mailto:cbyaruhanga@ucu.ac.ug)

Journal of Anglican Studies Vol. 8(2) 219–239. 2009 [Doi: 10.1017/S1740355309000011]

## ABSTRACT

The controversy over the ordination of women as priests in the Church of the Province of Uganda has been going on for a long time. Today, there are a few women priests in a good number of dioceses in the Church of the Province of Uganda. But this revolution against the conservative order of male domination has not come without a price. Women who feel called by God to the ministry in the Church of the Province of Uganda are usually discriminated against even when they eventually become ordained. One wonders whether women are called by God but ordained by men. This article looks at the work and ministry of one of those women who opened the door to the ordination of women in the Church of the Province of Uganda. In her response to the challenges of the time, Njangali not only refused the old definitions of women's involvement in church ministry but also guided the whole church to rethink and renew its leadership policy.

**KEYWORDS:** culture, deacon, feminist, mothers' union, ordination, province, synod, women's ministry

## Introduction

The role of women as ordained ministers has been a matter of debate for many years within Christian churches all over the world. In recent years, the issue of the role of women in the church came up strongly at the World Council of Churches Eighth Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, when the delegates from Greek and Russian Orthodox churches complained that the majority of the World Council of Churches member churches and denominations ordain women as ministers and priests.<sup>2</sup>

What Paul K. Jewett said about women in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches is true of women in the Church of the Province of Uganda (hereafter to be simply mentioned as Church). He said:

Since one is called by God to the office, one does not simply choose to be a minister as one would choose to enter a profession. One must be called and the call must be confirmed by the church. The question, then, is whether God calls women, as he does men, to be ministers in his name. Let those who scruple only consider what it has cost the church not to use the talents of the woman. Let anyone consult the hymn book and see what women poets have taught the people of God to sing and then ask what it would mean if such women were allowed to move beyond the relative anonymity of the hymnal to the full visibility men have had in the church.<sup>3</sup>

Debates on women's issues have, in the last few decades, assumed prominence on the Church's agenda. Today, resolutions are constantly being introduced and passed on ways to better the lot of women in the Church. The majority of Christians agree that the ordained ministry of the Church is composed of values that divide into male and female beings and yet women who offer themselves for church service suffer from

patriarchal oppression. This point is well expressed in Ann Warren's book, 'Today's Christian Women' in which she says:

Women whether at home or at work are generally more easily hurt by difficult situations and angry words and less able to cope with the cut and thrust of life. We are made as complementary individuals to men and we need their strength, their objectivity and their protection at difficult times. But equally, our very sensitivity and vulnerability makes us more ready to recognize our need of God and of his daily power and protection.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of women who are in church service have been treated as second-class citizens of the Kingdom of God in terms of the roles

2. For more information on this point see, Eva Stimson (ed.), *Together on the Holy Ground* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), p. 21.
3. Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns Publications, 1975), pp. 162, 170.
4. Ann Warren, *Today's Christian Women* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1984), pp. 17–18.

they play in the church hierarchy. One of the church workers to be treated as such was Florence Spetume Njangali. She was one of the very few women in Uganda who strived to make women's ministry in the Church a reality. Not only did she seek ordination for herself but through her work and ministry she also influenced the Church to pass a resolution allowing women's ordination in all the dioceses in Uganda. In every Diocesan and Provincial meetings during Njangali's time, people spoke favorably of their experiences with women dea-cons and other church workers and their significant contributions to the life of their dioceses. However, Njangali would always raise some concerns and challenges in the debate. She would always note the absence of women priests. Her concern was the lack of women in positions of real leadership in the Church. Njangali was not happy with the way the very few women workers were always being deployed in the Church. They would be employed as community workers or non-stipendiary deacons and thereby used as cheap labor for the Church. She foresaw a long journey ahead toward full and meaningful leadership of women in the Church.

### **Njangali's Childhood and School Life**

Njangali was born in Parajwoki village, in the present-day Hoima District, on April 10, 1908 to Nyakwebara and Eva Kacungira Amooti. Njangali was taught from an early age to love the Church and the Lord God with all her heart. Since her parents were committed Christians, they always took her to attend church services, especially on Sundays. Njangali, therefore, was brought up in a religious home under a Christian environment. She was a well-behaved and hard-working child and her parents and the entire village were proud of her.

Njangali was baptized on October 31, 1920 in St Peter's Cathedral, Hoima, and from then henceforth, she came to be known as Florence Septume Njangali. It was a well-attended service, filled with the families of the several candidates from Duhaga Girls' Boarding School and the surrounding daughter churches. Her uncle and king of Bunyoro, Bisereko Duhaga II, attended the function. As she grew up to maturity, Njangali was not only loved by God, but also, as a wonderful warm young lady, loved by her own family and claimed as a friend by very many people in Hoima.<sup>5</sup>

5. During Njangali's childhood, there were four kingdoms in Uganda namely, Buganda, Bunyoro, Toro and Ankole.

Even though Njangali's parents strongly adhered to the faith and practices of the Native Anglican Church, which in 1961 became the Church of the Province of Uganda, her uncle Duhaga was mainly responsible for her spiritual nurture. Duhaga had spent some time in Buganda in the household of one of the first ordained Baganda priests, the Revd Henry Wright Duta Kitakule, and had shown himself quick to pick new ideas. Even when he became King of Bunyoro, Duhaga continued to participate once in a while in teaching reading classes at the palace, and at times financed the building of churches in the villages in his kingdom. Christopher Byaruhanga says:

The accession of Andereya Bisereko as king (omukama) Duhaga II of Bunyoro in September 1902 was an asset for the establishment and consolidation of the African Anglican Church in Bunyoro. The new king was sincerely attracted to Christianity, and gave both the African and European missionaries every possible support. He also encouraged his people to become active Christians. He had good influence on the other members of his family.<sup>6</sup>

Njangali's formative years came to be greatly influenced by the principles and way of life of the Native Anglican Church. She used to spend a lot of time at the King's palace. Njangali was occasionally invited to the King's palace for talks and prayer. She was also given jobs to do at the King's palace. She enjoyed the way the King administered his kingdom. Njangali was fascinated by the court debates, trials and judgments made in cases that often came before her uncle.

Njangali's school life began in 1920 as one of the pioneer students of Duhaga Girls' Boarding School, a church-founded institution. Right from the beginning, Njangali was a keen learner of everything around her. In this endeavor she was assisted by her parents and her uncle Duhaga, who was a great supporter of formal education in Bunyoro. Her uncle, Duhaga, willingly paid all the school dues per term and usually encouraged her to set her sights higher than the rest of her colleagues. Njangali was one of the brightest students at Duhaga Girls' Boarding School, not only excelling in academics but also showing exceptional character. She became an active participant and leader in singing hymns, prayers and Bible lesson reading. Njangali did well in Religious Knowledge, Geography, Arithmetic, Swahili and in English. English was to be invaluable to Njangali in her later years, giving her the capacity to argue out issues at the national level.

6. Christopher Byaruhanga, Bishop Alfred Robert Tucker and the Establishment of the African Anglican Church (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2008), pp. 144–45

Although Njangali worked extremely hard and attended all extra-curricula activities, she enjoyed her school days at Duhaga Boarding Girls' School.

When Njangali joined Duhaga Girls' Boarding School, she had no idea that she was joining a tradition that was later to play a great role in the history of missions, namely, the evangelization of Uganda not just by missionaries from Britain and North America, but by the indigenous Christians. At this early age, Njangali did not clearly know the implications of joining this long tradition. At Duhaga Girls' Boarding School, Njangali met committed teachers who greatly influenced her spiritual life. It was here that she came in contact with the headmistress of the school, Miss M.B. Leakey, who was being assisted by two African women trained at Kyebambe Girls' School in Toro.<sup>7</sup>

As a schoolgirl Njangali was deeply influenced by Leakey's love for God and administrative ability. Leakey came from the conservative, Evangelical wing of the Anglican Church. She held the Bible to be the supreme authority for all matters regarding Christianity. Her teaching was that God inspired the Bible, and that it contained all spiritual truth. The Bible became the sole rule of faith and practice among the students at Duhaga Girls' Boarding School, since they considered it to be the only unerring standard of religious truth. Leakey also taught salvation as a definite turning at a specific point away from one's past sins, to Christ. She always taught her students that following the first step of accepting Jesus Christ as personal savior and Lord, a convert had to live a holy life committed to Christ. For Leakey, school education was aimed at telling the world that Christ died as a substitute for sinful humanity. It was this tradition, with great emphasis on the Bible and the cross rather than on church tradition, which Leakey would pass on to Njangali.<sup>8</sup>

In 1925, Leakey retired and was replaced by Miss E.H. Ainley. Ainley also came from the conservative Evangelical tradition. In her Christian witness to the girls at Duhaga Girls' Boarding School, Ainley drew a line between people who had undergone the experience of conversion and those who had not. The conversion experience, according to Ainley, marked the boundary between Christians and non-Christians. Once converted, according to Ainley, a Christian was

7. For more information on the role of the indigenous Christians in the evangelization of Uganda see, Louise Pirouet, *Black Evangelists: The Spread of Christianity in Uganda, 1891–1914* (London: Rex Collings, 1978).

8. Concerning the religious beliefs of Miss M.B. Leakey see, 'Duhaga Girls' School Jubilee 1908–1958 Magazine', pp. 4–7.

expected to demonstrate the reality of this new faith by personal holiness. She constantly made appeal to the high standards and disciplined life required of the girl converts with the hope that the individual lives, which had been redeemed and made anew as a result of conversion, would result in the reformation of society as a whole. It was this tradition, with great emphasis on the demonstration of the reality of the new faith by personal holiness, which Ainley would pass on to Njangali.<sup>9</sup>

### **Njangali's Teaching Career**

Within a few years of her stay at Duhaga Girls' Boarding school, Ainley had detected Njangali's inquiring mind and recommended her for appointment as her teaching assistant. By this time, Njangali had been nicknamed by her fellow girls magezi (wisdom) because to them she was as well informed academically as her two African female teachers. Njangali began to instruct girls who were even older than her into the mysteries of reading and writing. When Njangali completed her studies in 1928, she was appointed a teacher and was later promoted to deputy headmistress of the school. Njangali taught her students that Jesus Christ expected them to live by the highest moral standards.

Ainley's leadership style deeply influenced Njangali at a critical juncture in her own development, and contributed to the awakening of her sense of vocation. Ainley's philosophy was hard-work, honesty and self-determination. Njangali observed and became interested in Ainley's way of life and particularly her commitment and conduct as she carried out her duties as headmistress. Njangali was very much impressed by the way Ainley carried out her duties loyally, diligently and vigorously without supervision. Njangali's upbringing blended in very well with Ainley's philosophy and work ethic. When Ainley left in 1938, Njangali became headmistress of Duhaga Girls' Boarding School. Although by this time Duhaga Girls' Boarding School was more than fifteen years old, no headmistress had stayed for more than a few years and the school was suffering from lack of constructive long-term leadership.

By the time Njangali became headmistress, Hoima was a small town, and Duhaga Girls' Boarding School had grown into a small institution. But Njangali foresaw that Hoima would become a great town and she envisioned the school, at its center, responding to the

9. Concerning the religious beliefs of Miss E.H. Ainley see, 'Duhaga Girls' School Jubilee 1908–1958 Magazine', pp. 5–9.

needs of the growing town. Her vision was to see Duhaga Girls' Boarding School give its best to the people of Uganda. The Speech Day tradition and the joyous participation of the students in the great festivals seized the imagination of the people of Hoima more perhaps than any other one thing, and Duhaga Girls' Boarding School took a place of prominence and influence for the schools in Bunyoro. It was in Duhaga Girls' Boarding School that Njangali's contribution to the training of future women professionals and scholars was greatly impacted. Hoima church leaders supported Njangali and proudly followed her lead in the role she played in the larger life of the school.

From the time of her baptism, Njangali had relied on good works and mental assent to the Christian message, instead of surrendering all to Jesus Christ. On October 18, 1938 Njangali fully appreciated what it meant to be personally committed to Jesus Christ. In the East African revival tradition, it is not enough for someone to merely state that he or she is a Christian or that they are a member of a given church denomination. One must declare to God and the entire church congregation that he or she has made a personal commitment to love and to serve Jesus Christ. In this new understanding of her belief, Njangali found inspiration and comfort in the Christian friendship and companionship of the East African revival movement. The revival movement invigorated and renewed her life and offered her the challenge of a deeper experience of salvation in Jesus Christ and a more radical commitment to Christian discipleship. From this time on she began to think seriously about joining full-time church ministry.

Njangali's career at Duhaga Girls' Boarding School was briefly interrupted when, as a result of her spiritual transformation, she enrolled in Bishop Tucker Theological College, Mukono in 1942 for a two-year Lay Reader's course. When Njangali set out for Bishop Tucker Theological College, it was an historic event itself. No woman had ever attended that course let alone studying alongside men. She was the only female student in a class of thirty.<sup>10</sup>

Njangali completed her Lay Reader's course in 1944 and returned to Hoima to continue with her duties as headmistress of Duhaga Girls' Boarding School. She was commissioned as Lay Reader in St Peter's Cathedral, Hoima. Her licence, in part, reads:

It shall be your duty as a Lay Reader when called upon to assist the priest in such a way as may lawfully be directed. Under the direction of

10. For a detailed record of the thirty students see, 'Records of Students of 1942', Uganda Christian University Archives.

a priest-in-charge you may conduct services of Morning and Evening Prayer, read or preach sermons and with the Bishop's permission administer the Chalice at Holy Communion and such as other services as may, from time to time, be approved by the Bishop.<sup>11</sup>

Njangali's passionate intensity was in no way diminished by her training at Bishop Tucker Theological College. Her renewed zeal for the gospel irritated those who resisted the implications of her message, especially among the relatively sophisticated men working at the school. Njangali always emphasized repentance through open confession, the breaking down of barriers of clan or tribe and the equality between men and women.<sup>12</sup>

Under Njangali's distinguished leadership, Duhaga Girls' Boarding School expanded and gained national recognition as a center of excellent academic standards. Njangali's own educational background helped her to guide and inspire her students to aim higher in life. Soon the Native Anglican Church in Uganda recognized Njangali's work and influence and in 1953, she was appointed a member of the Native Anglican Synod in Uganda. As early as 1909, Bishop Tucker had come up with a type of Constitution that would give more power to the Ugandan Christians from all over his diocese to manage their own church affairs. In this Constitution, church members were to elect their representatives to the Synod. There were two guiding principles of Tucker's Constitution, namely, concentration and decentralization. It created at the center a strong governing body that would carry the weight, which only a truly representative body can.

The Native Anglican Church Synod in Uganda was such a representative body. It consisted of members, of whom not more than a third were clergy, drawn from every part of Uganda. Each district in Uganda was to elect so many representatives in proportion to the number of communicants. Njangali represented Bunyoro district. The Native Anglican Church Synod was a democratic body. Europeans, kings, chiefs and the indigenous Ugandans sat together and voted on equal terms, the indigenous delegates forming the large majority. All questions of outstanding importance were referred to the Synod and its decisions were binding on all members of the Native Anglican

11. A copy of Njangali's Lay Reader's License is in File LR 1/1944, Bunyoro-Kitara Diocesan Office.

12. One of the emphases of the East African revival movement is the equality of men and women before God in the revival fellowship meetings but not in formal church leadership. For more information on this point see, H.H. Osborn, *Pioneers in the East African Revival* (Winchester, UK: Apologia Publications, 2000), p. 266.

Church. As a representative body, the Synod counted among its members many of the most powerful traditional leaders in the country. Consequently, the Synod had a remarkable influence in the Native Anglican Church, and commended, as no other body did at the time, the confidence of the country. Njangali was proud to belong to such a powerful entity.

Njangali was also a member of the Diocesan Council that acted for the Synod in the interval between its sessions. The members of the Diocesan Council were appointed by and responsible to the Synod. It consisted of two delegates from each of the large districts, which formed the diocese. It met once a month and to it the minutes of all local councils and of all its own advisory Boards were submitted. The more detailed and departmental work of the Diocesan Council was entrusted to a variety of Boards, which were purely advisory and reported to the Council. In this way, the work of the Native Anglican Church was unified and centralized.

For quite long, Njangali was part of that controlling power of the Native Anglican Church in Uganda. Her experience in the Native Synod, the Diocesan Council and from 1961 in the Provincial Assembly gave her a unique opportunity to learn about the principles of democracy, self-government and self-support. As a member of the Synod, Njangali was very instrumental in the creation of the Church of the Province of Uganda with a new Constitution. Tucker's 1909 Constitution was succeeded by the 1961 Church of the Province of Uganda and Rwanda-Burundi Constitution. The 1961 Constitution was accepted and approved by the Synod and the Diocesan Council of the Upper Nile on April 27/28, 1960, and came into effect in 1961. Article 1 of the 1961 Constitution reads:

The Church of this Province shall be named the Church of the Province of Uganda and Ruanda-Urundi [Rwanda-Burundi] and shall consist in the first instance of the following Dioceses: Northern Uganday. Sorotiy. Mbale. Namirembe. West Buganday. Ankole-Kigezi. Ruanzori [Ruwendori]. Ruanda-Urundi [Rwanda-Burundi].<sup>13</sup>

Njangali was happy with the 1961 Constitution which, like the 1909 Constitution, had a built-in ability of weakening tribal boundaries and barriers, thus creating a comprehensive church. But she was always critical of the Church Missionary Society missionaries who tended to favor the central region. She always warned that the Church Missionary Society missionaries' attitude toward other regions would

13. '1961 Constitution', File IPS 226/16, Uganda Christian University Archives.

create a situation where the dioceses in the central region would consider themselves special and the rest of the dioceses would develop the feeling of deprivation. Njangali often argued that the horizontal conflict within the Church would compromise the original idea of a comprehensive Church of Uganda.

Njangali's fear of the horizontal conflict within the Church was confirmed at the time of Archbishop Bishop Brown's resignation in 1965. Brown was British and had been Bishop of Namirembe, the cathedral headquarters of the Church. So long as Brown was Arch-bishop of the Church of the Province of Uganda and Rwanda-Burundi and the Diocesan Bishop, Namirembe also functioned as archdiocese of the Province. And Namirembe Cathedral was popularly regarded by all Christians in Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi as the Provincial Cathedral. As soon as Bishop Brown announced his resignation, the question of who was to succeed him became one of the hottest issues in the Province. Since Namirembe Cathedral was in the traditional Baganda territory, and the Baganda were the largest single tribe in Uganda with the biggest number of Christians, the majority of the Baganda Christians thought that a Muganda Bishop would succeed Brown. It was at this time that Njangali transferred her services to Ruwenzori diocese to work with Bishop Eric Sabiliti who later became the first archbishop of the Church of the Province of Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. When asked what was at stake in the Church in 1965, Njangali said, 'in 1965, seniority was not an issue, but tribe. By showing tribal sentiments in 1965, the Baganda lost any possible support from their colleagues for the post of Archbishop'.<sup>14</sup>

### **Njangali as a Lay Theologian**

Undoubtedly Njangali did more than any other woman in the Church to help women gain access to theological education. In 1957, she retired from her position as headmistress of Duhaga Girls' Boarding School and returned to Bishop Tucker Theological College for an ordination course the following year. Njangali's decision to resign her post and join full-time church ministry surprised many Christians in Bunyoro. Full-time church ministry during Njangali's time was popularly known as 'a poor man's profession' because it was characterized by poverty. Church workers did not know where their next meal would come from. One could not afford decent living conditions because of the unpredictable

14. Amooti Katebalirwe, one of Njangali's relatives, interviewed by the author, December 10, 2006.

and very low income from the Church. Why should one leave a well-paying job for a dead-end position in church ministry and more so when she is a woman? Some people would ask. But for Njangali, serving the Lord was more important than all other callings in life.

From the 1950s, the Church began to respond to modern culture in many ways. For instance, during this time Bishop Tucker Theological College administration allowed Njangali as the first woman student to study theology much earlier than anyone ever thought of the ordination of women in Africa. Eventually, Bishop Tucker Theological College women graduates, especially Njangali, were influential in the ordination of women campaigns. When Njangali signed up for theological training alongside men at the college, she was not easily accepted in the lecture room by her male counterparts. Olivia Nasaka says:

When Florence was admitted in BTTC the whole nation got shocked at her move. Despite all, she stood her ground and joined the college. The first slap in her face was the realization that there was no space for her in the lecture rooms. The staff members and the students were all perplexed, how could a woman sit in the same room with them and study theology? Did she have the capacity to absorb the contents given by the lecturers?<sup>15</sup>

Commenting on her experience as a woman training for church ministry at Bishop Tucker Theological College, Njangali said:-

During my theology course at Bishop Tucker Theological College, a number of things were revealed to me about how a woman is perceived by men in the Church of the Province of Uganda. The first day I reported for lectures in a class of male students, I never believed what I heard and saw. I was told to sit outside and study from the veranda! That experience did not stop me from participating positively in any discussion. Sometimes I would stand and openly challenge what I considered oppressive tendencies against women. However, my active participation in discussions was in most cases viewed by my classmates as arrogance.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout her theology course, Njangali took it upon herself to defend the rights of women as equal partners in church ministry. Referring to the status of women in the traditional society, Njangali argued that in the past women in Uganda were not excluded from

15. Olivia Nasaka, 'From the Veranda to the Frontline', Uganda Christian University Opportunity Issues Magazine 1 (May 1998), p. 22.

16. Florence S. Njangali, 'Speech at the Pastors' Retreat, 1978', File 1978/BKD/05, Bunyoro-Kitara Diocesan Office.

decision-making processes. What used to obtain was that parallel organizations would be established for both sexes. Where it was necessary for women to be excluded from some traditional matters that necessitated serious discussions, to arrive at the final decision and implementation, women could not be excluded or else those decisions would fail. For instance, while leadership in traditional marriages was largely retained by the father of the girl or the boy, the leadership role in discerning what was needed for the occasion would include the views of the mother of the girl or boy.

Njangali was of the view that of all the doctrines of the church, Christology was the one most used to oppress women because of the way the maleness of Jesus was being interpreted. She said that the fact that Jesus was a male human being was beyond question. That this was a historical fact that had to be respected. However, the problem arose when during her time the maleness of Jesus was taken for granted as the only proper way to represent God. Njangali disagreed with those church leaders who used to say that God is more suitably thought of in an analogy with male human beings. Njangali did not suggest the use of an inclusive language but while not going as far as this, she emphasized the point that although God is referred to with masculine names, this does not mean that God is male.

At the Synod, although a laywoman, whenever she was allowed to address the delegates, she always made a passionate appeal to awaken the Church to its need to abandon its patriarchal attitudes. She used to argue that Jesus' preaching proclaims justice and peace for all people, inclusive of women. That the reign of God is diametrically opposed to any group setting itself up as exclusively privileged and relegating others to the periphery. At this time, the clergy in Uganda were a formidable group opposed to the young women enthusiasts for gender equality. However, Njangali always exploited one of the consistent themes of the East African revival movement, namely, its opposition to authoritarianism in church life. Even then one of the outstanding characteristics of Njangali was her fundamental loyalty to the Church. Despite her strong, often passionate criticism of the Church, she saw herself as called to witness to her church from within.

When Njangali graduated from Bishop Tucker Theological College in 1960, she was posted to Ankole-Kigezi diocese not as a deacon but as a 'church commissioned worker' to head the Mothers' Union Department. Mothers' Union was very well known, as it is today, for its desire to have everyone married to one partner in the church. Its understanding of marriage to be a lifelong commitment falls within the African understanding of marriage. It is believed in many African

societies that from the very beginning of human life, God commanded people to get married. Therefore, marriage for Africans is a sacred duty. Once the full contract of marriage has been executed, it is extremely hard to dissolve it. The Mothers' Union considers marriage to be like the rites of passages in Africa, which can never be repeated by individuals. For this reason, Mothers' Union is against divorce.<sup>17</sup>

Njangali worked to further the ideals of the Mothers' Union and to promote the dignity of women by presenting monogamy as the best solution for marital relations. She taught that openness, integrity and honesty — characteristics of healthy relations between committed Christians — should apply even more to the marital relationships to foster real sharing, mutual love and respect. Thanks to her efforts within the Mothers' Union in Ankole-Kigezi diocese, women gained the right to confess, testify, preach and pray on an equal basis with men.

Njangali was the pioneer of feminist theology in Uganda. She was always conscious of the way in which women are perpetually relegated to second-class citizenship in the Ugandan society and in the Church. She always said that 'this should not be; this is against the will of God'. The vision that guided Njangali's feminist theology was that of a new human community based on the values of mutuality and reciprocity. In her ministry as Mothers' Union worker, Njangali always encouraged women in Ankole-Kigezi diocese to love to work with men. The reason she usually gave was that God created women and men to help each other and not one sex to oppress the other. She used to argue that her goal was not to reverse oppression, with women oppressing men; that would be the same problem in reverse. Her conviction was that women share equally with men in the dignity of being human. Njangali looked forward to a church with no one group dominating and no one group being subordinated, but men and women participating according to their gifts. She did not envision that men and women be the same, but that the uniqueness of each be equally respected in a community of brothers and sisters.<sup>18</sup>

Today, feminist theology, which Njangali pioneered, is divided roughly into two categories, namely, revolutionary and reformist. The revolutionary feminist theology is produced by women in Uganda who,

17. As women were not allowed to be ordained as deacons even at the out-come of the ordination course, they were called 'church commissioned workers'.

18. Njangali's feminist theology is found in her notebook entitled 'Itwena tuli omukisiisani kwa Ruhanga' (We are all made in the image of God). This notebook which has no date is with Amooti Katebalirwe, one of Njangali's relatives whom the author interviewed on December 10, 2006.

upon examining the Christian tradition, find it so male-dominated that they pronounce it as hopelessly irredeemable and therefore opt to leave the church. On the other hand, reformist feminist theologians, whom Njangali would identify with, agree about the male-dominated character of the Christian tradition but always find reason to hope that the male-dominated character may be transformed. They, therefore, chose to stay within the church in Uganda and work for reform.<sup>19</sup>

Njangali played a substantial part in changing traditional views of women and their work in Uganda. She opened up a new space for women within the Church. During Njangali's time it was often said, as it is sometimes said today, that women who were unmarried had no status at all in society. They would agree with John S. Mbiti who says:

For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator. Therefore, marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejects him or her in return.<sup>20</sup>

As an unmarried woman and as Mothers' Union worker, Njangali was in a very interesting position but her understanding of Gal. 3.28 helped her to reconcile her status as a Christian and the concepts of society around her.<sup>21</sup>

In her feminist theology, Njangali always emphasized the point that 'the value of a woman begins when she is born, not when she gets married'. The role played by Njangali in bringing changes in the status and roles of women is now receiving more attention in Uganda. She broke with the traditional roles considered normal for women church workers, and became a legend in her own time. Her advocacy of independence for women went beyond what was considered correct in the Church. Although Njangali was aware that acute marital problems arose from the prevailing concept of inequality of men and

19. For detailed information on the two categories of feminist theology in Uganda see, Joy C. Kwesiga, 'Is a Feminist a Valour or Villain?', *Arise, a Women's Development Magazine* 23 (January–April, 1998), pp. 27–28.

20. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2002), p. 133.

21. Gal. 3.28 says, 'There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus'.

women in Uganda, she tended to look at the issue of marriage as a spiritual matter.

Although Njangali had no 'official status' according to the Ugandan culture, her role in the Church and society opened the way for future possibilities, to which African women might also attain. She recruited the unmarried women into the Mothers' Union as 'Associate members'. Associate members in the Mothers' Union have continued to redefine women's roles in Uganda. Njangali is now seen by many people as a change agent in the Uganda church history.

In 1965 she transferred her services to Ruwenzori diocese and eventually to Bunyoro-Kitara diocese in 1972. In all the three dioceses, Njangali assumed a position of great significance and came to be recognized as the foremost figure in the Church. When Bunyoro-Kitara diocese was formed in 1972, Njangali was one of the faithful supporters of Bishop Yustus Ruhindi's *garuka nkokwoli* (return as you are) philosophy.

Njangali was also involved in building ecumenical relations between the major denominations in Uganda, namely, Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. In 1963, Njangali attended the All Africa Conference of Churches Consultation in Kampala, Uganda, in which she participated in a discussion on the place of women in the church. She believed that the role of any church was to meet the needs of the local community and that if Christian denominations in Uganda continued to engage in religious wars against one another, the needs of the local community would never be met. Njangali argued that the church in Uganda was called by Christ to shed the gospel light on God's poor and broken people, rather than to allow inter-denominational quarrels to perpetuate the darkness of Uganda's painful past history that had shamefully defined the church.<sup>22</sup>

Njangali also believed that Christians in Uganda were called to live in a unity that respected diversity. She upheld the value of denominations but she also underlined the inherent dangers, saying that Christians in these denominations were called, as Christ's own, to respect the dignity and wholeness of every human being. For every person is as precious and valued as God's own son, Jesus Christ. She always said that the church is called to protect the body of the living Christ here on earth against the forces that would destroy it. The Uganda Joint Christian Council deeply respected Njangali's position on ecumenism.

22. For a detailed account of the inter-denominational quarrels see, Christopher Byaruhanga, Bishop Alfred Robert Tucker and the Establishment of the African Anglican Church (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2008), pp. 59–69.

Even with such a good track record, Njangali was denied ordination on the grounds that she was a woman. The Church's objections were inextricably intertwined with prejudice and cultural sensitivities. Those opposed to her ordination would note that throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and from the early Christian Church to Njangali's time, God always chose only men for all leadership positions. That in ancient times, only men of a specific Jewish tribe could act as priests. This act of discrimination was rooted in the cultural bias of Ugandan men. During Njangali's time, men argued that God had appointed women to be subordinate to men and, therefore, there was no basis for Njangali to rule over men in any way. But Njangali always reminded the church that within the African traditional religion, there were numerous female deities, female mediums, female priests and female diviners. Men of all ranks paid respect to them. Although in the Ugandan traditional society women had a role in the spiritual sphere, this did not lead to the assumption that they could have a leadership role in the church. Perhaps the reason was that there were no women priests in the Christian Church at this time. For Njangali, the discrimination of women in the church seems to have come from the European culture but not from the African culture. She quickly used to point out that Jesus Christ broke with the tradition of male superiority on many occasions and that St Paul acknowledged female ministers. By allowing women ordination, Njangali argued, the church would be returning to Jesus Christ's pattern of gender equality.

### **Debate over the Ordination of Women in the Anglican Communion**

Organizationally, the Anglican Communion during Njangali's time mirrored the hierarchical male culture of the post-World War years. Men occupied all major decision-making positions. The debate over the ordination of women in the Anglican Communion began in the 1920s with the debate over the entry of women into the diaconate. In 1944 Florence Tim Oi Li was ordained in Hong Kong. The 1948 Lambeth Conference rejected a proposal from Hong Kong that would have validated Li's ordination to the priesthood, warning that such an action would be against the Anglican tradition and order, and would gravely affect the internal and external relations of the Anglican Communion. Eventually Li withdrew from active ministry in the face of pressure on her bishop from the Anglican Communion.

In 1964, Phyllis Edwards was ordered deaconess in the Episcopal Church, and based on the current changes, her bishop announced his intentions of admitting her to the diaconate without re-ordaining her.

In 1968, the Lambeth Conference agreed on women deacons and encouraged study of ordination of women as priests and referred all debates concerning this issue to the first meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council in 1971.

In 1971, the Anglican Consultative Council meeting in Limuru, Kenya, declared that it was acceptable for a bishop to ordain a woman to priesthood with the consent of his national church or province. The Council said:

In reply to the request of the Council of the Church of South-east Asia, this Council advises the Bishop of Hong Kong, acting with the approval of this Synod, and any other bishop of the Anglican Communion acting with the approval of his Province, that if he decides to ordain women to the priesthood, his action will be acceptable to this Council; and that this Council will use its good offices to encourage all Provinces of the Anglican Communion to continue in communion with these dioceses.<sup>23</sup>

By the end of 1977, a good number of women in the Anglican Communion were ordained priests.<sup>24</sup> The Anglican Communion's decision to ordain women was partly as a result of the recognition of what certain women such as Njangali had already accomplished in their ministries. However, such recognition was never granted without a serious battle. However, some bishops in the Anglican Communion remained opposed to the ordination of women and refused to consider women candidates in their dioceses. Some churches remained open on this issue and the Lambeth Conference expressed the same consensus by commending respect for those people who held differing views on the ordination of women to priesthood. While debates continued over the ordination of women to priesthood, the 1980s brought about the question of the ordination of women to episcopacy. In 1988 a Convention of the Diocese of Massachusetts elected Barbara Harris as Suffragan bishop. The consecration of Harris as the first female bishop on February 11, 1989, in the Episcopal Church represented for many Anglican women, including

23. Anglican Consultative Council, *The Time Is Now: Anglican Consultative Council First Meeting Limuru, Kenya 23 February–5 March 1971* (London: SPCK, 1971), p. 39.

24. In 1971, the Synod of Hong Kong and Macao became the first Anglican Province to officially permit the ordination of women to the priesthood. In 1976, the Episcopal Church became the second province within the Anglican Communion to adopt canonical changes, formally allowing the ordination of women. The Anglican Church of Canada followed the Episcopal Church and ordained its first women on November 30, 1976 and New Zealand in 1977.

Njangali, finally, full acceptance into the Anglican Communion as ordained ministers.<sup>25</sup>

### **Njangali as a Deacon**

While Njangali's male counterparts were ordained into priesthood, she worked as a commissioned worker until September 10, 1973 when her former classmate, the Bishop Yustus Ruhindi ordained her as the first deacon in the whole of East Africa. Ruhindi studied at Berkeley Divinity School, Yale University, where he was exposed to many new theological ideas especially in the area of ecclesiology. He was very much influenced by the Broad Church movement as well as Billy Graham's theology. Ruhindi was consecrated bishop on August 6, 1972, at St Paul's Cathedral, Namirembe and enthroned as the first bishop of the Bunyoro-Kitara diocese on October 29, 1972. He began by calling all the Christians in Bunyoro-Kitara diocese to rededicate themselves to God. He considered the church to be a home for everybody regardless of their sex.

Due to his theology of the church, Ruhindi found no reason as to why Njangali should not be made a deacon. On September 10, 1973 Njangali became the first woman to be made a deacon by any of the two major branches of Christianity in East Africa, namely, Roman Catholic and Anglican. Some people have wondered as to whether Njangali's relation to the royal family of the ancient kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara was a factor in her becoming the first woman deacon in Uganda. Wilson Turumanya, the former Diocesan Secretary and retired Bishop of Bunyoro-Kitara, argues that Njangali's relation to the royal family was not a factor in her becoming the first deacon in Uganda, rather her ordination was the result of Bishop Ruhindi's policy of utilizing the empowering values within Christian Scripture and the Western culture such as equality and freedom to improve the status of women in his diocese.<sup>26</sup>

While some lay people and the clergy welcomed Njangali's ordination, others were outraged. They argued that it was sacrilegious and not biblical for a woman to be ordained deacon, because Jesus Christ did not have a woman among his apostles. Others attacked Njangali personally as a radical and as an unmarried woman who lacked a

25. For the background information on Barbara Harris's election to episcopate see, Pamela W. Darling, *New Wine: The Story of Women Transforming Leadership and Power in the Episcopal Church* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1994).

26. Wilson Turumanya, former Diocesan Secretary and Bishop of Bunyoro-Kitara, interviewed by the author, August 1, 2008.

good example in society. Njangali agreed that she had never been married, but she did not feel that made her unsuitable for church ministry as a deacon. At the end of 1973 and early 1974, it looked as if the church in Bunyoro might split over the issue. On May 11, 1974 Bishop Ruhindi called the Bunyoro-Kitara Diocesan Council and one of the main items on the agenda was the ordination of women. In his charge, Ruhindi drew examples of women leaders from the revival movement. After a long debate on the issue, the Council unanimously accepted Njangali's ordination. From 1974 onward, the ordination of women was not an issue in Bunyoro-Kitara diocese.<sup>27</sup>

Although at this time a woman could be ordained a deacon in Bunyoro-Kitara diocese, she was not allowed to be ordained a priest. This meant that a woman could be an assistant but not a full member of the clergy. Many dioceses in the Church preferred to continue with the practice of commissioning women. During Njangali's time, the majority of men and the clergy in the Church presumed to speak for God as they demanded for total obedience of women. It was therefore not easy for a lot of women in Uganda to experience God as empowering when they were in the Church's ambit. The majority of women in the Church's ambit experienced God as a source of women's oppression and Jesus as the author of the exclusion of women from sacramental roles in the Church. But Njangali always saw herself clearly as the elect of God. Her intense loyalty to Jesus Christ shaped and directed her character. She was a woman totally available to the purposes of God. She knew she was a woman chosen to bind up the broken and to lift up the downtrodden women in Uganda. No matter the cost of personal hardship, Njangali never shunned from the call to duty. She was a woman ready to comply at once with Jesus Christ's wishes for women in the Church.

Although Njangali was very influential, as a deacon, her status was not encouraging. For instance, she rarely preached as she had no parish. Her major work was to serve women through Mothers' Union. Even under such circumstances, Njangali continued to advocate for the loving acceptance, due recognition and sympathetic support of deacons and other women workers in the Church as co-participants in the church ministry along with men. When Njangali advocated for loving acceptance, due recognition and sympathetic support of

27. For a detailed background on this point see, 'Orubazo rw'Omurolerezi wa Bunyoro-Kitara' (The Bishop's Charge) in File BGC/1/197, Bunyoro-Kitara Diocesan Office 4.

deacons and other women church workers, she was hoping that these women church workers would be strong pillars for establishing relationships of trust and mutuality with women in the pews. She hoped that women workers would be willing to talk about the reality of women's experiences in their sermons and therefore be able to make connections between church, home and society. That in itself Njangali thought was a possibility for women to be included in the telling of the story of faith to the community of faith. She was of the view that the body language of women and men working together in ministry would be a gesture of men and women sharing leadership and responsibility. Njangali warned women deacons and other women church workers against the attitude of competition between them and men, a power struggle and a search for positions of dominance, or mere wars between the sexes. Njangali's argument was that no matter how logical an argument in support of ordination of women might seem, if it deviates from the biblical values of equality, mutual respect and the dignity of persons, that argument ceases to be valid. She always said that the Bible texts that are for and against the ordination of women must be approached with a new perspective, neither from the point of view of women nor from the point of view of men.<sup>28</sup>

In Uganda, the ordination of women was started in Kigezi diocese where, in the 1960s, Njangali had worked as the head of the Mothers' Union Department. In 1983, with the support of his own diocese, Bishop Festo Kivengere of Kigezi ordained three women as priests in spite of official opposition from the Church. Since 1983 the Church has ordained women as priests.<sup>29</sup>

As a result of Njangali's church ministry, there are two views concerning the role of women in church ministry in Uganda. There are those who believe women should be permitted to hold all positions of pastoral authority in the Church. There are also those who believe that only men can hold such positions in the Church. Those Christians who believe that women should be restricted from holding an authoritative, pastoral role in the Church embrace what is known as the traditional view. Those who hold to the traditional view of women in ministry claim the support of traditional Christian thought and teaching throughout church history. On the other hand, those who

28. The issues this paragraph highlights are not just for Uganda, but for other places in the Anglican Communion as well.

29. The first three women to be ordained priests are the Revd Canon Monica Sebidega, the Revd Canon Deborah Micungwa Rukara and the Revd Margaret Kizanye Byekwaso

believe as Njangali did that women possess the ability to occupy all positions of leadership within the Church embrace what is referred to as the 'progressive' view. Njangali's work and ministry in the Church is on the whole a reflection of the inevitable influence of culture on Christian understanding. It is also a demonstration of how culture conditions people's understanding of reality at a particular time and location.

## **Conclusion**

Few ordained women in their church ministry in Africa have been able to respond to the challenges of the time in as many ways as Njangali did. She reinvented church ministry for the future by refusing the old definitions and expectations. She expanded the very essence of Christian ministry and guided the whole Church to rethink and renew its leadership and membership.

In her last years, Njangali was full of hope for the good ministry by the Bunyoro-Kitara diocese, in which she was herself deeply involved. As far as her ministry was concerned, she felt that she had done all that she could probably accomplish in her lifetime. In 1981, at the age of 73, feeling that her ministry was complete, Njangali decided to retire because of her age and due to an incurable disease from which she was suffering. However, the Dean of St Peter's Cathedral asked her to plant a daughter church in Katasiha during her retirement and she did so willingly.

Njangali's last days were spent with her family and dearest friends. On January 20, 1984, Njangali passed away in Mengo Hospital after what seemed to be only a short illness. Her funeral took place on January 23, 1984 at St Peter's Cathedral, Hoima where she had served her diaconate.