

Many Batwa children are discouraged from attending school because of stigmatisation from fellow learners and members of the community.

BY ALEXASHABA

In Bundibugyo District, along the Uganda–DRC border, the Batwa community now live in Ntandi Town Council after they were evicted from Semuliki National Park in the 1990s following its gazettement.

The Batwa, who traditionally lived as forest dwellers, had migrated from the DRC to hunt and gather in the forest.

Since their eviction, the Batwa are a highly marginalised community, facing challenges such as extreme poverty and limited access to basic services, including education.

Currently, it is estimated that just about 47 Batwa children are enrolled in both primary and secondary education, according to Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU), an organisation supporting the Batwa in the district.

One of the institutions supporting the education of Batwa children is Our Lady of Annunciation Bugombwa Nursery and Primary School, a private Catholic-founded school.

Sr Juliana Charik, the school head teacher, said the school began enrolling Batwa children after they were identified within the community in 2016. She said at the time, there was no school specifically for Batwa children and they faced significant discrimination from surrounding communities.

“At first, it was hard to believe that Batwa children could attain education. My colleague, Sr Angelica Tumwesigye, first encountered the Batwa during fieldwork in Ntandi,” Sr Charik said.

She said a parish priest at Bugombwa provided a church social hall where the first group of Batwa children were enrolled. However, they were not familiar with formal school settings and many of the children would frequently run away and return to their communities.

They were later transferred to the nearby government-aided Bugombwa Primary School.

The head teacher said this approach was unsuccessful, as the Batwa children feared interacting with other members of the community because they were often stigmatised.

“Some people labelled Batwa children as mannerless, dirty, or unwilling to learn. We brought them to study at the primary school, but when we took them there to learn alongside other children, they refused. Because of their nature, the Batwa children are shy, so they were not comfortable studying in that environment,” she said.

She explained that the largest number of children then were in Primary One and Two, which forced her to start a nursery section at the church premises, despite the structure being temporary.

“So I was forced to start a Primary One class for the Batwa in 2016. At that time, the government was closing schools that did not meet the required standards. I went to the District Education Officer’s (DEO) office to report myself because I expected to be imprisoned for teaching in such poor structures,” Sr Charik said.

She noted that upon learning that she was teaching Batwa children, the DEO provided her with the official curriculum for Primary One and Two.

She added that each year, as the learn-

# How Bundibugyo’s Batwa are fighting for education



Sr Charik Juliana (centre, back), the head teacher of Our Lady of Annunciation Bugombwa Nursery and Primary School in Bundibugyo District and officials from CCFU with Batwa pupils last week. PHOTO/ALEXASHABA

ers moved to the next level, a new class was introduced to support their progression.

Sr Charik said educating Batwa children soon became a collective responsibility, adding that they partnered with the CCFU, with strong backing from the district leadership.

Other stakeholders, including district officials, the police, and the local community, also became actively involved.

She further explained that after three years of persistence, the efforts began to yield results. The children gradually adapted to school routines, their confidence grew, and their willingness to learn improved.

## Infrastructure and holistic support

Sr Charik said the church later provided land where CCFU constructed a dormitory, a three-classroom block and a toilet facility.

“Beyond physical infrastructure, CCFU supported the children both academically and culturally. They helped establish cultural clubs where children could perform traditional dances and reconnect with their heritage,” she said.

She added that CCFU developed learning materials in the Batwa local language, including charts, storybooks, and reading materials, making learning more accessible and meaningful.

The head teacher said since the establishment of the school in 2016, eight students are currently enrolled in Senior Three, nine in Senior Two, while seven are in Senior One.

She added that six pupils (four boys and two girls) are set to be registered for the 2026 Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE). Overall, the school currently has 32 Batwa pupils in the primary section out of a total enrolment of 172 learners, which also includes children from the surrounding community.

She further noted that CCFU bought 3.8 acres of land where livelihood programmes were introduced at the school. At first, the children were too young to take part in farming, but over time, each child has started growing their own banana plants.

## Ongoing challenges

“After spending months in structured settings at home during holidays, they often come back changed, less disciplined, disengaged, and sometimes destructive. Uniforms are lost, property is damaged, and some lose interest in school altogether,” Sr Charik said.

She appealed to the government to consider deploying government teachers to the school. Currently, the school relies on Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) funds to pay teachers, which she said is

insufficient.

She also called for additional scholastic materials and more classroom structures, emphasising that it is one of the only schools specifically supporting Batwa children.

Mr Fredrick Nsibambi, the deputy executive director of CCFU, explained that they began working with the Batwa in 2013, focusing on cultural preservation and later on education.

“We recognised that the Batwa had been disconnected from their cultural heritage due to displacement, and we sought to help reconnect them with it,” he said.

However, he noted that they later realised the Batwa community’s most immediate needs were not cultural, but rather centred on survival, particularly livelihood and education. As a result, they initially invested in livelihood programmes before gradually shifting focus to educational infrastructure.

“We shifted our focus toward infrastructure development. We constructed classrooms and dormitories primarily for Batwa children, although these facilities are also used by learners from neighbouring communities such as the Bamba, Babwisi, and others,” he said.

He added that currently, CCFU supports all the 47 Batwa learners by providing scholastic materials, paying school

fees, and ensuring they are accommodated in boarding facilities.

The organisation also supplies essential items such as bedding, mattresses, and beds.

Mr Nsibambi explained that in a bid to ensure long-term sustainability, CCFU introduced a cocoa farming project at the school. The project involves cultivating cocoa on approximately 3.8 acres of land acquired by the organisation.

“The crop is progressing well, and we expect harvesting to begin within the next one to two years. The goal is for proceeds from cocoa production to support the education programme. As an NGO dependent on donor funding, we recognise the risk of funding fluctuations. Cocoa farming is, therefore, intended to serve as a sustainable source of income,” he said.

He added: “We hope, resources permitting, to see them through to university. We believe education is key to transforming the community. If we can nurture even 10 to 15 educated individuals, they can return and help change mindsets and uplift the entire Batwa population.”

The Batwa cultural leader, Mr Geoffrey Nzito, said three of his five children are enrolled studying in secondary school while the other two remain at home.

“Those studying at Bugombwa are being supported by CCFU, but more than 20 others remain at home in our community. We lack the money for fees and transport to take them to school,” he said.

The Chief Warden of Semliki National Park, Ms Norah Mbubi, explained that the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) supports education for Batwa children by providing free transport to school at the beginning of each term.

“We collect the children from their community and transport them to school. Without this support, many of them would remain at home. At the end of each term, we also pick them from school and take them back home. We have done this consistently over the years, and all their children are enrolled in the boarding section,” she said.

She added that they have also extended support to the community through various capacity-building initiatives aimed at improving livelihoods. These include training in energy-saving cooking technologies and rainwater harvesting.

Ms Mbubi further noted that community members have been trained in a range of income-generating activities such as bee-keeping and the processing of bee products, including wax, candles, shoe polish, perfumes, and jewelry.

Additional skills training has covered hand-crafting, basket weaving, mat making, wood carving, mushroom growing, and vegetable farming.

“In addition, new vocational training programmes are planned in areas such as motorcycle repair, hairdressing and salon services, carpentry, tailoring, and bakery. Unlike earlier phases, these upcoming training sessions will be followed by direct material support to ensure beneficiaries can immediately apply the skills they have acquired,” she added.

## CHANGING TIMES

The 2024 National Population and Housing Census report indicates a sharp decline in the Batwa population in Uganda, dropping from 6,200 people in 2014 to 3,857 in 2024.

In Bundibugyo District, the Batwa cultural leader, Mr Geoffrey Nzito, said when the community crossed into Uganda in the 1990s and settled in Semuliki National Park, their population stood at about 300 people. Today, however, only about 160 individuals re-

main in the district.

He attributes this decline largely to intermarriage with non-Batwa communities, particularly the Bamba and Bakonzo.

“As their cultural leader here, I encourage my people to marry fellow Batwa. I, myself, have one wife, a Mutwa. But in other areas like Kisoro, many of our women are married off to non-Batwa, which is why you see changes even in physical appearance,” he said.

He added that in Bundibugyo, cases of intermarriage and abandonment are common, with some

men from neighbouring communities fathering children and later disappearing.

Mr Nzito further expressed concern over the gradual loss of Batwa cultural practices, noting that changes in diet and lifestyle are also contributing to the community’s decline.

“We no longer strictly follow our culture. We now eat foods we never used to eat. Traditionally, we depended on bush meat. When we abandon our culture, our numbers keep reducing. It pains us to see our population declining,” he said.