

## Though Things Have Changed, This Is How We Used To Celebrate Christmas Day

Kamala J Lutatinisibwa

From my infancy to youth-hood in the 1980s and 1990s, the 25<sup>th</sup> of December was treated as a great and special day. It was *Nweli* day, my ethnic pronunciation—thanks to my mother-tongue interference— of an English word ‘Noel’, another name for Christmas Day. Neither my parents nor village mates bothered to know what Christmas actually means. By then, the main knowledge was that it was just a big day (*sikukuu*), which had to be vigorously celebrated regardless of one’s ethnic nor religious affiliation, with Christians and non-Christians alike joining hands in enjoying it. It took some years for village mates to realise what Christmas day actually meant and that it had some historical roots and spiritual meaning mainly for Christians and not any other man-made religious group.

In my village, we knew that it was mainly a day for crazy celebrations for which we had adopted local name *Nweli* (Noel) or a *Sikukuu* (big day) as we lacked grounded knowledge about it, let alone its historical background. Preparation for the next Christmas Day celebration was approximately a yearlong! Yes, villagers formed groups for collecting cash gradually from January so that by the end of the year, members of each group could afford to slaughter a cow or a goat. Men always collected money for as much local brew as possible and to afford some concubine bills. What gave me a hard time were efforts galvanised and expended for a single day in year for an event over which we knew little about. Youngsters endured enough hardships to accomplish the *Nweli* celebration. Even when the day finally came, we had to shoulder the blue-collar jobs punctuated with slaps, yelling and canes from one or both of the parents to ensure we toed the line.

As children, who had to obey parents to avoid punishment and to ensure successful future through inheritance, we were forced to be meek and humble before our parents and ensure that they got their wishes. We had to wake up early in the morning to milk the cows and then prepare tea for our soon-to-wakeup parents to enjoy their Christmas breakfast. Beef and other meat stuffs had to be prepared in advance. Christians rushed to our one mud-walled church some kilometres from home where all prayers and worship had to be very brief to avoid ruining the festivities: the believers wanted to rush back home for their beautiful meals being prepared at home after which everyone wanted to be the first attendee at a local brew garden to moisten the throat.

Christmas Day was almost the one and only one day in which the youngsters could wear a necktie regardless of the type of a dress covering one’s bod. Remember we used to buy oversized clothes so that we could grow up with them. Sometimes, your eldest brother decided to lend you his shirts and shoes for Christmas Day. Obviously, that pair of shoes was oversized for you. Imagine a small-sized body in an XXL shirt!

Sometimes, our beloved ones living abroad used to send us some pairs of shoes for Christmas regardless of the size that fits you. It was like a comedy show as we walked to and from our village church. Almost everyone had developed a new walking style; some could limp, others walked as if they were preventing their shoes from escaping from their feet.

Some of our friends wore new bathroom sandals to church for the first time as part of Christmas celebrations. Remember that shoes or sandals were a vocabulary not available in our dictionary. If one looked closely at a person who pretended to be happy on such a *Sikukuu*, one realised that something was not right, shoes are too thin and tight for his feet and hence the lack of freedom occasioned by endless pain. During lunch time, there was a problem. Our eating place had no chairs, and we had to squat on the floor with neckties

Though Things Have Changed, This Is How We  
Used To Celebrate Christmas Day, Kamala J  
Lutatinisibwa

and with our oversized new clothes. We could invite any esteemed neighbour for lunch but did not let any madman come near our houses during lunch time as he/she could be stoned to death or have all abuses in this world thrown at him/her

As young boys, we did anything to prove our superiority to attract girls. I remember one Christmas Day when my three friends and I happened to have a few coins. We bought one bottle of Coca-cola. We went through all the houses with girls of our age holding that precious bottle, one after another. In fact, it added our names to the number of the village's superstars since not many young people knew the taste of Coca-cola. At around 5pm, we started sipping at our coke, one at a time. Our teeth were strong enough to open the bottle, so no bottle-opener was needed. Each could take one sip and hand the bottle over to his eagerly waiting neighbour. We did this pass-on-the-drink trick repeatedly, especially when we came across girls to show-boast. We ended up fighting, since the bottle seemed to be emptying at an alarming speed before quenching our thirst. The last person to take a sip was always blamed for having a big mouth—otherwise the soft-drink couldn't finish so easily. History was made—that these guys drank soda during Christmas Day!

Don't ask me about our fathers and brothers! These were now in the local pub, garden, or den,, moistening their throats with local brew. They always shouted at one another strongly since after imbibing the local brew converted everyone into smarts who happened to be clever than others and had to speak it out aloud to

drown other voices. Only a few of them could manage to stand on their two feet! Our moms and sisters stayed at home cleaning the dishes. People passing by congratulated us on seeing and being part of such a great day. Our fathers remained in local brew dens until the following day as they indulged in the local brew and could not walk on their two feet.

The following day was referred to as a second Christmas Day (you call it Boxing Day). Many villagers were injured as a result of fights and violence aggravated by excessive consumption of standard-less local brew. Above all, many of us ended up with stomach-aches since we used to over-eat on Christmas Day and some consumed half-cooked meats and other edibles.

*Nweli* ended with a number misunderstanding which had to be sorted out by the village elders. Nowadays things are different, knowledge has spread and, therefore, Christmas Day is celebrated mainly by Christians. Questions on the validity of the Holy Book are taking place and, hence, atheism might be on the rise. Some questions for a verse or two in a Bible directing them to celebrate Christmas or legality of the revolutionary Jesus to have been born on 25<sup>th</sup> of December.

Do people still drink like crazy? I don't know, but something good is that, when it comes to celebrations, especially when you don't know what and why are you are celebrating makes things great, well and good. You simply have to enjoy without raising questions. At the end of the day, we washed our clothes and shoes, ready for the next great day! New groups had to be formed early in January to prepare for the coming December. Things have now changed, we are educated, dwelling somewhere in cities,

but we can never forget our past, this is in a nutshell regarding how we celebrated Christmas Day in my local village in Bugandika Ward, Kagera region, somewhere in Tanzania.

Kamala J. Lutatinisibwa  
Email: [jkamala@gmail.com](mailto:jkamala@gmail.com)