The passing of a leading activist

IN SUMMARY

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Dar es Salaam. Ndigwako Bertha Akim King’ori (affectionately referred to as Bertha), Tanzanian educator, scholar and women development advocate, has passed away. She died in Kenya on November 4, this year as a result of various ailments, including stroke and diabetes.

She was one of the leading women in her country of birth, scoring firsts as student, teacher and leader – member of the pre-independence legislator (Legico), Umoja wa Wanawake wa Tanzania (UWT) executive secretary, and member of the East African University Council.

Born on November 19, 1930 in Tukuyu, Rungwe District, Mbeya, to the late Subila Kabonga and the late Akim Mwakosya, Bertha was everything a woman would want to be. Defying the stigma of sending a girl child to school, Bertha notched up to become a renowned scholar, educator and advocate for women’s involvement in the community in East Africa.

She was one of a few girls from Tukuyu to go to school, progressing to Tabora Girls’ School in Tanzania; and on to Uganda where she attended Gayaza High School and King's College Budo, before entering as the first Tanganyika woman the prestigious Makerere College in 1954. At Makerere she was awarded a Diploma in Education (Mathematics).

After posting to Loleza Girls’ School in Mbeya, Bertha won the Van Leer and Atlanta Fellowship in 1956, which allowed her to attend any college in United States for further professional development for one academic year. Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts, was on her sight. Keen on child studies and the development of African children, she graduated in child psychology and sociology.

On returning to Tanzania, Bertha taught at Mpwapwa and Butimba Teacher Training colleges; and was later appointed Headmistress of Bwiru Girls’ Secondary School in Mwanza.

Meanwhile, in the last days of independence struggle, Bertha could not escape the attention of the outgoing colonial government, as well as that of the successor Uhuru government under Mwalimu Julius Nyerere’s Tanganyika African National Union (Tanu).

She was the first African woman nominated as member of the Legislative Council of Tanganyika (Legico) in 1957.

Later, Mwalimu Nyerere appointed her Umoja wa Wanawake wa Tanzania (UWT) executive secretary in 1967. Bertha was also appointed member of the East African University Council in 1965.

Above all these responsibilities, Bertha was a loving mother and spouse. She married her college sweetheart, the late Peter Gathura King’ori on November 29, 1958 in Tukuyu.

Bertha and Peter distinguished themselves teaching in schools and colleges in Tanzania and Kenya. They were blessed with five children, two of whom have sadly passed on.

Having moved to Kenya with her family, Bertha and Peter carried on with their teaching career; Bertha has taught at Machakos High School, Kenyatta College and Coast High School. A devout Christian, Bertha also served on the National Christian Council of Kenya (NCCCK) and became the first African woman representative in the Anglican Consultative Council in 1973.

According to family members, Ms Bertha King’ori’s health began failing in 2006 due to complications, including stroke and diabetes. Having lost memory, she also lost touch with a lot of friends and former colleagues.

On November 4, she succumbed to cardiac arrest. A fitting memorial service took place on Thursday, November 14 at the All Saints’ Cathedral, Nairobi, Kenya; followed by a solemn funeral and burial on November 15 at the ACK Nyange Church, Kakulet, Noru Moru and final rest at Mwalimu King’ori Farm, Nyeri.
Bertha’s siblings of distinction include brothers (late) David Albert Mwakosya, agronomist/permanent secretary, Public Service Management and Dr Nathaniel Benjamin Akim, medic/permanent secretary, Health, as well as first cousin Tabitha Siwale, ex-minister for Lands, respectively.

The eulogy in tribute to Bertha, celebrates her life fully: “Bertha was a pillar of strength and wisdom, a pioneering role model and an inspiration for many who knew her. She was a committed Christian and her dedication to the Lord was demonstrated clearly through every aspect of her professional and personal life”.

She is survived by her three children and their families; grandchildren and several great-grandchildren; as well as numerous cousins, nephews, nieces and in-laws in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

Mr Ulli Mwambulukutu is a veteran journalist.