From Kitara to the Lost Counties: Genealogy, Land and Legitimacy in the Kingdom of Bunyoro, Western Uganda

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This article examines the use of genealogy in the politics of colonial Bunyoro, a kingdom within the modern state of Uganda. In particular, the article focuses on Bunyoro’s attempt to have territory that had been transferred to a neighbouring kingdom at the time of conquest, known as the ‘lost counties’, restored to their homeland. Such ethnic, irredentist political activity in Africa has often been regarded as retrogressive and anti-modern. In Bunyoro, early attempts to win back the lost counties did emphasise the ruling dynasty’s genealogical claim for regional pre-eminence on the grounds that Bunyoro was the oldest and formerly the largest of the Great Lakes kingdoms. What is significant is that when Bunyoro’s leaders realised that this concentration on the ancient past was counterproductive, they revised their strategy. The Banyoro began to use imperial ideology against local colonial policy, by turning the rhetoric of indirect rule, anti-slavery and ultimately self-determination against their British over-rulers. Similarly, the royal government employed petitions based on archival research, effective lobbying of nationalist politicians, British Queen’s Counsels, and finally low-level terrorism in an increasingly modern and sophisticated campaign.

Introduction

Bunyoro, or to give it its full current title, Bunyoro-Kitara is today a relatively small kingdom in western Uganda of about 7,000 square miles and around 1.3 million people. It is one of the poorer parts of Uganda, and is politically quite insignificant. The Banyoro have supplied the current NRM government with few government ministers or prominent MPs, in contrast to the other western Ugandan ethnicities. Their kingship, restored in 1993, has regained nothing like the status and wealth enjoyed by the monarchy in Buganda or Tooro. Bunyoro’s leaders feel some degree of frustration at their low status and lack of influence and wealth. The most important
outcome of this frustration was the decision taken in 2003 by the king of Bunyoro to seek compensation for alleged war crimes and illegal land transfers committed during Britain’s war of conquest in the 1890s. Bunyoro is accordingly suing the governments of Britain, Uganda and Buganda, the kingdom which borders Bunyoro to the south, for £3 billion (The Guardian, 23 October 2003).

This is not the first time that Bunyoro has raised these issues. Throughout the colonial period, the kingdom pressed Britain to return the lands known as the lost counties which it had transferred to Buganda during the conquest war. Bunyoro’s colonial leadership constantly reminded British officials that their kingdom was the oldest and formerly the largest in the region. Several historians have shown how the published histories of the kingdom that were written by court officials in the colonial period were, in part, rather transparent propaganda aimed at convincing Britain of Bunyoro’s genealogical and territorial ties to the lost counties (Wrigley, 1996, p. 38; Tantala, 1989). Bunyoro’s fixation with its glorious past, and particularly its colonial campaign for the lost counties, has been portrayed by some Ganda intellectuals as a symptom of Nyoro backwardness and self-defeating nostalgia (Kiwanuka, 1968; Mutibwa, 1982). This article will argue that Bunyoro’s elite did manipulate its royal genealogies and territorial history, but will emphasise that such reinterpretation was a competitive, regional phenomenon, one that had begun long before the colonial period. More importantly, the court histories were only a minor part of Bunyoro’s campaign to regain her lost status. The lost counties campaign is significant because of the growing sophistication and complexity of the ways in which the manipulation of genealogy and territorial claims were expressed in order to overturn imperial policy. Bunyoro’s leaders employed not only traditional genealogical histories, but also arguments based on the imperial ideology of indirect rule, anti-slavery and ultimately self-determination, petitions based on archival research, effective lobbying of nationalist politicians, the legal expertise of British Queen’s Counsels, and finally low-level terrorism. The politics of genealogy in colonial Africa should not be viewed as a purely retrogressive, anti-modern phenomenon.

There is, of course, a large degree of nostalgia and myth-making in Bunyoro’s colonial history-writing. To an extent this fixation with the past in Bunyoro may have obstructed modernisation; one of Bunyoro’s prime ministers from the colonial period admitted that Bunyoro’s chiefs ‘put more emphasis on this issue of the lost counties instead of thinking about development’.1 But modernisation is not the only political goal worth striving for. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the manipulation of the past in Bunyoro is the extent to which it influenced the contemporary political culture of colonial Bunyoro. The argument that Bunyoro was the true heir to the ancient, multi-ethnic empire of Kitara, and that the Babito dynasty originated in the marriage of Nilotic and Bantu cultures, made it difficult for the colonial-period leadership to adopt the ethnic exclusiveness that became increasingly a feature of late-colonial east Africa. The inclusive, integrative nature of Nyoro society during the colonial period seems in part to have been a by-product of this self-stereotyping.
The tendency of court intellectuals throughout the Great Lakes region to exaggerate the length and coherence of royal genealogies has been discussed by a number of writers (e.g. Henige, 1974; Tantala, 1989; Chrétien, 2003) in recent decades. Most recently, the reliability of Bunyoro’s dynastic histories have been questioned by Christopher Wrigley (1996, pp. 38–41), who argued that the depiction of the past in colonial Bunyoro was skewed by the kingdom’s loss of both territory and influence to her great rival, Buganda, as a result of imperial conquest in the 1890s.

The tradition that found its way into print at the beginning of the twentieth century was a work of art, in which myth and history were woven into a formal design of great imaginative power. Wrigley hypothesised that Nyoro historians re-wrote royal genealogies during the colonial period in order to tie British conquest into a longer tragic history of decline. Thus they constructed a history of Bunyoro in which the ruling Babito clan were re-defined as blood heirs to the wonderful Bacwezi, who had ruled an immense empire called Kitara, encompassing most of the Great Lakes region. The Bacwezi were thus transformed from ancient deities into a royal, divine dynasty, which ultimately abandoned Bunyoro due to their subjects’ disobedience. Bunyoro’s history, then, was one long gradual fall from grace, culminating in the humiliation of defeat in the 1890s. Wrigley’s interpretation is teleologically elegant, but conflicts with the arguments of Renee Tantala (1989, pp. 15, 24–25, 246), who has demonstrated quite convincingly that the idea of an ancient Bacwezi empire developed in pre-colonial times as a legitimising device for the incoming Babito clan. Thus the transformation of local clan-based Bacwezi deities into an ancient dynasty occurred many centuries ago, not at the start of the twentieth century.

The accuracy and reliability of Bunyoro’s dynastic histories has been further questioned by David Henige’s research (1974, pp. 105–14), which showed how the published kinglists of Bunyoro lengthened rapidly between 1875 and 1935 from five to twenty-three monarchs. As the lists grew, so the inconsistencies and contradictions among them multiplied. Moreover, it became increasingly clear that Bunyoro’s royal historians were constructing their kinglists with reference to, and in competition with, those of the neighbouring, rival kingdom of Buganda. Buganda’s kinglists had been published first; they were remarkably consistent in the number and order of the rulers, and they were longer than Bunyoro’s. It seemed self-evident that Buganda’s lists were more reliable, and logically therefore that Buganda was an older kingdom than Bunyoro.

These recent analyses of Bunyoro’s royal genealogies have rightly questioned the dynastic link to the Bacwezi, the elastic nature of the Babito kinglists, and the extent and nature of the ancient kingdom of Kitara. But this scepticism should not be interpreted as an indication that Bunyoro’s pre-colonial significance was entirely fictitious. Thus Henige was right to observe that the first European explorers in Bunyoro could only obtain the names of a handful of recent kings, but it is worth
noting that John Hanning Speke, the first European to visit Bunyoro, recorded that
the Babito dynasty in Bunyoro had been in existence for at least twenty generations
(Speke, 1863, p. 116). Henige by 1980, moreover, had come to the conclusion that
although he had previously argued ‘that the kinglist of Buganda, in contrast to that of
Bunyoro, gave every appearance of being reliable and historically accurate’, in fact
further research led him ‘to the conclusion that the Ganda lists may be no more
accurate than those of the Nyoro’ (Henige, 1980, pp. 240–41). The Baganda had
become literate earlier than Henige had first realised and they had revised their
understanding of genealogy under the tutelage of pre-colonial Arab visitors.
Therefore the coherence of the published Ganda kinglists may not have reflected a
uniform oral tradition. Influenced by Jack Goody’s writings (1977, pp. 74–111),
Henige (1980, pp. 242–52) came to believe that the compiling of lists of any kind
were probably not employed in non-literate societies as a way of organising useful
knowledge. Thus we should not expect that pre-literate ‘oral historians would regard
the listing of previous rulers in proper historical sequence as a practical and
productive form of activity’. Instead, Henige argues, pre-literate historians of
Bunyoro and Buganda ‘used past rulers only as convenient conceptual referents
around which they grouped other sorts of remembered historical data’. Recognisable,
apparently chronological, kinglists only emerged as a function of literacy in the
middle of the nineteenth century, and became elongated and homogenised in
appreciation of the European’s value-system, where a kingdom’s age gave it status, or

Buganda’s extended kinglist therefore partly resulted from the value that visitors
from western and Arabic cultures attached to long royal genealogies. In addition,
though, it is likely that the manipulation of the Ganda kinglist was influenced by the
ideological struggle between Buganda and Bunyoro for the loyalty and respect of
other Great Lakes societies. Buganda, frustrated that her regional standing in the
middle of the nineteenth century did not yet reflect her ever-increasing wealth and
power, attempted to usurp Bunyoro’s claim to be the true heirs to the ancient,
immense empire of Kitara, from which many of the region’s kingdoms supposedly
emerged. It seems clear that the rhetorical struggle between Baganda and Banyoro for
Kitara’s inheritance was going on before Europeans arrived in the region. The first
European explorers in the 1860s were told, on reaching Bunyoro’s capital, that the
Banyoro enjoyed regional pre-eminence on the basis of genealogical links to the
ancient state of Kitara. Thus the explorer Speke (1863, pp. 249, 482, 497) was
informed that Bunyoro’s king, Kamurasi (1852–69), was ‘the father of all the kings’,
‘the king of Kitara’. A sense of the competitive nature of this genealogical contest
comes from the observations of Linant de Bellefonds, who travelled through this
region in 1875. De Bellefonds (1876, p. 76) records how, presumably with increasing
scepticism, he heard the king of Bunyoro, two rebel Nyoro princes, and the king of
Buganda each claim ‘to be the only true descendants of the princes of Kitara’, all
within a matter of weeks.
In this struggle for ideological legitimacy, Buganda had the advantage of physical might and material wealth. She clearly had become a richer and more powerful state than Bunyoro by the middle of the nineteenth century. But Bunyoro had myth and tradition on her side. Throughout the region oral histories recalled that Bunyoro had been all-powerful in the distant past. The founding myths of many states across the region, including, it can be argued, Buganda, indicated that the founders of ruling dynasties had come from Bunyoro (Wrigley, 1996, pp. 20, 194–97; Beattie, 1971, pp. 27–31). It may be that Bunyoro’s success in maintaining local acceptance of its link to Kitara explains why King Mutesa of Buganda (1856–84) increasingly turned the focus of his propaganda elsewhere. Firstly, either his readings of imported Arabic texts or conversations with foreign visitors inspired him to claim that he was a descendant of Ham, son of Noah, surely a guaranteed route to international status (Wilson, 1878, p. 704; Médard, 2001, p. 624; Henige, 1980, p. 253). Secondly, he, along with other Ganda leaders, determinedly portrayed Bunyoro as an enemy of western civilisation. Ultimately this angle of attack proved the most effective in securing Ganda regional dominance, by encouraging British officers to bring Bunyoro into their empire with uncompromising force.

In the early 1890s Buganda accepted the ‘protection’ offered by the British empire, and sought immediately to turn the new alliance to her advantage. Newly-arrived British officers were persuaded that Bunyoro had historically been one of Buganda’s tributary kingdoms, until a new king, Kabaleega (1871–99) had allied with Arab slave traders and Mahdist ‘fanatical Mohammedans’ in order to assert his country’s independence from Buganda. British officials came to believe that ‘the Christian country of [Bu]ganda is of vital importance’ in the ‘continued struggle in the centre of Africa between the advances of European civilisation’ and the forces of Islam and the slave trade (Perham & Bull, 1959, vol. II, p. 121). Therefore, as one officer put it, for ‘the development and prosperity of [Bu]ganda . . . Kabarega’s power must be broken and his prestige destroyed’ (Macdonald, 1973[1897], pp. 296–98). In December 1893 a combined British and Ganda invasion force crossed Bunyoro’s border, beginning a war of conquest that was to last for five and half years. In 1894, with the war hardly started, Britain’s commissioner in Buganda, Henry Colvile, decided to transfer the southern half of Bunyoro’s territory to her historic enemy, Buganda. Two of the ceded counties, Buyaga and Bugangaizi, formed the core of the ancient kingdom, containing many of Bunyoro’s royal graves and ritual sites. The Nyoro inhabitants of these territories became the subjects of incoming Ganda chiefs, were frequently dispossessed of their land, forced to learn the language of Buganda, and suffered occasional maltreatment and systematised discrimination (Roberts, 1962, pp. 194–96).

Bunyoro’s campaign to secure the return of these ‘lost counties’ dominated her colonial experience. At each stage of her campaign, the claim that Bunyoro was the oldest and formerly the largest and most prestigious kingdom in the entire region lay at the heart of the appeal for justice. The emphasis was always on the contrast between Bunyoro’s pre-colonial glory and power and her colonial condition, where
she was the smallest district in the Protectorate, with one of the lowest populations in Uganda. The most interesting aspect of Bunyoro’s campaign is how it evolved over time, developing in response to failure, and increasingly seeking to use the ideology and structures of British imperialism in order to overturn colonial policy within Uganda.

Bunyoro’s early appeals for the return of her ‘lost counties’ were summarily rejected by early colonial officials. Bunyoro’s determined resistance to colonial conquest had entrenched her reputation as an enemy of imperialism, and the first generation of colonial administrators constantly reminded the kingdom that it was conquered territory. Kabaleega was deported to the Seychelles on being captured in 1899, with his young son Kitehimbwa, put on the throne as a puppet king, being told ‘plainly that he is only king by courtesy’. Kitehimbwa was deposed in 1902 for protesting against Ganda exploitation of his people and attempting ‘a move to return the “Lost Counties”’. The harshness with which other protestors were treated during the consolidation of imperial control meant that appeals for the return of the lost counties over the next two decades were made indirectly, if at all (Karugire, 1980, p. 215; Doyle, 2006, pp. 96–107).

By the 1920s, however, the atmosphere of colonial politics had changed. Partly this was the result of a generational change, the scars of conquest having healed to some extent, and years of peace and gradual progress softening Europeans’ opinions. By the 1920s British administrators were less likely to harbour grudges against peoples who had resisted the colonial take-over, and had become more concerned with management than control. The Banyoro had rehabilitated themselves within the empire during the First World War. Their leaders professed loyalty and contributed generously to Uganda’s war chest, while the peasantry suffered in the Carrier Corps with gratifying stoicism. Officials, meanwhile, tended to stay longer in Bunyoro by the 1920s, learning Runyoro and increasing their understanding of the local culture. In 1924 the enthronement of a new king in Bunyoro, Tito Winyi, was used as an opportunity for the governor of Uganda to announce that the politics of exclusion and discrimination were over. It was hoped that Bunyoro would participate enthusiastically in rapid economic development if it were better treated. Moreover, the new dogma of indirect rule and British conservatism between the wars meant that Africa’s ancient kingdoms were now in fashion. Governor Archer told Bunyoro’s leaders:

I look to see this ancient kingdom restored to prosperity and vigour. Certainly the British Administration will do all in its power to assist Bunyoro to rise again to its proper position.

At last it seemed the British were prepared to listen to appeals for the return of the lost counties.

Initially Bunyoro’s leaders responded to the new openness of their British overlords by trying to persuade them that returning the lost counties to Bunyoro would be the ethically correct course of action. A number of court histories were published
which argued that Bunyoro was once the largest and ‘most ancient kingdom’ in Uganda, that all Uganda’s other kings were ‘descendants of the kings of Bunyoro’, and that before conquest she had been ‘greatly feared and honoured’. They also claimed, referring to the testimonies of contemporary witnesses, that the late nineteenth-century antagonism between British proto-imperialists and the Banyoro resulted from misunderstandings or British aggression. Great play was made of the fact that Bunyoro’s royal shrines were almost all located in Buyaga and Bugangaizi counties (Karubanga, 1969; K.W., 1935; K.W., 1936; K.W., 1937; Nyakatura, 1973; Bikunya, 1927; Hall, 1984, p. 201). These histories did have some success in convincing their British audience of the validity of their territorial claims. For example, the missionary-anthropologist John Roscoe, the most respected expert on Uganda’s indigenous societies at this time, was convinced by the information supplied by Bunyoro’s colonial aristocracy that Bunyoro ‘was at one time the largest and most powerful of all the autocratic kingdoms in the lake region of Central Africa’ (Roscoe, 1923, p. 1). Similarly, a senior British administrator, J. Postlethwaite, noted in his memoirs that transferring the lost counties to Buganda had been ‘one of the greatest blunders we committed in the past’ (Postlethwaite, 1947, pp. 90–91).

Another opportunity for Banyoro to make formal requests for the boundary changes of the 1890s to be reversed came when colonial officials became involved in matters that inevitably required discussion about Bunyoro’s pre-colonial history. In the early 1930s, negotiations over both land reform and the introduction of a formal agreement between the colonial state and the kingdom of Bunyoro were slowed down by frequent reference to the boundary issue. Such an approach secured only limited concessions, however. The 1933 Agreement between Britain and Bunyoro confirmed Winyi’s line as the rightful rulers of the kingdom, and referred to the kingdom as Bunyoro-Kitara, implicitly accepting Bunyoro’s claims to historical pre-eminence in the region (Willis, 2006). Article 2, moreover, officially allowed for future territorial expansion by stating that Bunyoro-Kitara

shall comprise the District of Bunyoro as delimited from time to time by the Governor by Proclamation, provided that there shall be no contraction of the existing boundaries. (Uzoigwe, 1982, p. 123)

But Winyi’s demand that the Agreement formally refer to the lost counties was rejected, leading him to make a public protest during the signing ceremony.6

The most interesting aspect of the ethical approach to the problem was the language used by Banyoro in formal petitions for the return of the lost counties. In King Winyi’s formal petitions (of 1943, 1945, 1948, 1949 and 1954) to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, he argued that the imperial ideologies of indirect rule and trusteeship demanded the return of the lost counties. If indirect rule was based on the idea that tribes should be governed through their traditional rulers, then why, Winyi asked, was this not the case in Bunyoro.
I am well aware that Government have divided the districts in this Protectorate according to tribes, customs, languages and regime; but this policy has not been followed at all in this nation of Bunyoro-Kitara. Bunyoro-Kitara has been divided into many parts... major portions... have been transferred to foreign countries... Moreover the people within these territories are compelled to speak a foreign language.

The issue was one of morality and justice, 'the universal mark of the British Empire'. Meanwhile, the Mubende-Banyoro Committee, a pressure group formed by Banyoro living in the lost counties, also repeatedly petitioned Uganda's governor and the secretary of state, reminding them that Britain had offered Uganda her protection primarily to stamp out the slave trade, yet the Banyoro were now 'ruled under the form of slavery'. This skillful turning of imperial rhetoric against the colonial system had by the 1940s won the moral argument for Bunyoro, but Uganda’s governors, such as Charles Dundas (1955, p. 207), while accepting that boundary revision would be ethically correct, emphasised that nothing could be done, as the Baganda refused to negotiate any transfer of land and colonial coercion would provoke unrest.

After 1945, Bunyoro’s appeal to a mythical or manipulated past began to backfire. The interwar period in British Africa had been highly conservative, with its focus on indirect rule, the maintenance or invention of tradition, and the quest for social stability (Morris & Read, 1972, p. 15). Bunyoro’s emphasis on the antiquity and legitimacy of its kingship had therefore found a willing audience among colonial officialdom, which saw Bunyoro in these years as a model kingdom. King Winyi was ‘quite the best chief of the territory’ with ‘a traditional standing such as none of the others can pretend to’, according to Uganda’s governor. Winyi fitted the system of indirect rule perfectly. He was authoritative, cooperative and efficient, was close to his people, and dispensed ‘fair but firm justice’. Bunyoro’s government was not expected to do very much in this era, but it was done well.

The problem for Bunyoro was that indirect rule became inconvenient for the colonial state after 1940 because now the British became active modernisers again. This was the era of five-year-plans, democratic local government, social workers and cooperatives. Bunyoro’s post-war royal government quickly became viewed as reactionary and obstructive, and the district fell into relative decline. By the 1950s Bunyoro was being referred to as a ‘banana boat’ or ‘dead end’ district, and officials gently mocked the ‘faded pageantry’ of a king ‘with a hole in his sock’. As one former administrator recalled:

No DC who had served in Bunyoro had ever emerged well from the ordeal; few if any had been promoted and none had made a great name for himself. (Bazley, 1993, pp. 18, 267–68)

Instead of admiring the ceremonial and dignity of the kingship, after 1940 officials instead complained about the corruption, delays and intrigue that they now associated with traditional kingship. Bunyoro’s leaders’ focus on their kingdom’s antiquity and former pre-eminence, which had formerly worked in their favour, now
began to count against them. The very success of the Banyoro in convincing outsiders of their country’s former greatness only heightened the impression of a people in terminal, long-term decline. The Nyoro historiography with its glorification of the past was accepted by Europeans but reinforced their disillusionment with the unprogressive present. As one administrator remembered, ‘the many things that were needed here and now were laid aside or postponed while they mourned their lost counties’11, Bunyoro’s ‘national obsession’ (Burke, 1964, p. 73). This association of Bunyoro with ‘wasted effort’ helps explain government underspending and understaffing in this district after 1945. The era of genealogies in colonial Uganda was over (Doyle, 2006, pp. 172–73).

Yet Bunyoro’s leaders continued to exert moral pressure on the colonial state to reverse past wrongs, despite knowing that their persistence was antagonising their rulers. One former politician acknowledged that the British ‘were probably fed up with this question of the lost counties, whenever they came here we would raise it’.12 Officials’ frustration was unquestionable. Privately, they called the Banyoro ‘a race of political gasbags’ (Bazley, 1993, pp. vii). The ethical approach was maintained until the end of colonial rule, but once its inadequacy was recognised, Bunyoro’s campaign evolved and diversified rapidly. After 1945 Winyi sought to by-pass Uganda’s governors and their parochial concerns. He worked energetically and successfully to get a Munyoro appointed to Uganda’s legislative council, so that the lost counties issue might be taken up by nationalist politicians from other parts of Uganda.13 He requested the colonial secretary to send a royal commission to investigate the problem, while plans to petition MPs and the United Nations were announced.14 In the 1950s petitions based on archival research were printed, and legal advisors were hired in London, with the aim of demonstrating that the land transfer had been illegal (Dunbar, 1965, pp. 188–89).

This did at least ensure that the case was considered by the colonial office’s legal experts, but their opinion was that while the transfer of territory may not have been morally defensible, it would be very difficult to prove that it had not been legal. The issue, as they saw it, was essentially political rather than judicial.15 This had been the opinion of Governor Dundas in 1943, when he accepted the ethical case for boundary review. But he anticipated that if the Banyoro in the lost counties made a serious bid to return to Bunyoro, then policy would have to change.16 It was the stalling of the legal approach, combined with the sense that independence might come before the issue was resolved, that drove Banyoro living in the lost counties to begin a campaign of civil disobedience, boycotts, arson and violence against their Baganda chiefs in 1960, encouraged and financed by Bunyoro’s kingdom government. The unrest forced the Uganda Relationships Commission, charged with somehow finding a workable constitutional formula to bring Uganda to independence as a unitary state, to spend a great deal of time investigating the lost counties issue, which the commissioners regarded as a problem ‘in a class by itself’ (Mutibwa, 1982, pp. 269–70). The commissioners’ report recommended that a referendum should be held in the two counties, Buyaga and Bugangaizi, where Banyoro still formed the majority of
the population, and in one other county chosen by Bunyoro, with the counties which voted for re-unification being transferred to Bunyoro when independence was achieved. The Colonial Secretary, Ian Macleod, however, while describing the report as ‘excellent’, ignored its recommendations on the lost counties, and refused to discuss the matter during Uganda’s independence conference. Macleod recognised that acceding to Bunyoro’s demands threatened to make Buganda’s threats of secession a reality.

Accordingly, a commission of Privy Councillors (the Molson Commission) was sent to investigate the lost counties problem in 1962. The commission found that Banyoro living in the lost counties had sometimes suffered discrimination, and overwhelmingly wished to be ruled by Bunyoro. The argument which convinced the commission that the territories should be returned again showed how Bunyoro’s message could be adapted to the conditions of the day. The Privy Councillors were reminded that in Africa ‘the sense of tribal loyalty is very strong indeed.’ But among the Banyoro, ‘it is perhaps stronger than in many tribes, because they have a long-established kingdom to which loyalty can be directed.’ Moreover, the lost counties ‘form the core of their kingdom. It was their holy of holies, as one of their books described it, and it contained the burial places of their kings.’ The problem was not really that the Banyoro in the lost counties suffered discrimination at the hands of the Baganda. It was that they were usually treated as though they were Baganda. They were forced to accept the identity of ‘their hereditary rivals and enemies’. With independence approaching, ‘it would not be morally right to leave large ethnic groups under a disliked alien rule.’ ‘It would also be politically wrong’, because ‘it would be likely to cause a civil war’. It was ‘the duty of the British government to cure a continuing wrong’ before leaving Uganda. If Britain was preparing to grant Uganda independence on the grounds of self-determination, then before it left, it must apply the same principle to the Banyoro of the lost counties. The self-determination argument persuaded the commissioners to recommend that Buyaga and Bugangaizi counties should be transferred to Bunyoro before independence. The new colonial secretary, Reginald Maudling, however, refused to agree to such a timetable because of the threats of violence issued by Buganda’s leaders (Mutibwa, 1982, pp. 292–93).

The issue had by this time become caught up in the swirl of nationalist politics. Milton Obote’s Uganda People’s Congress (UPC), though supportive of Bunyoro’s case, knew that they could only take power in Uganda with the support of the ethnic nationalist Ganda party, Kabaka Yekka (KY). A deal was struck whereby the UPC agreed that the lost counties problem would not be resolved before independence, and that the king of Buganda should be post-colonial Uganda’s head of state, in exchange for KY’s political support for a future UPC government. Uganda’s independence constitution, despite Bunyoro’s protests, accordingly stated that the referendum in the lost counties would be settled by referendum in the disputed territories, but this referendum would not take place in the first two years after independence. In the event, Obote’s decision to proceed with the referendum in 1964 caused an irreparable breach in the unholy alliance between the UPC and Buganda’s
royalists. The referendum saw Buyaga and Bugangaizi, the two lost counties which still possessed a Nyoro majority, return to Bunyoro. Ironically though, the split in the UPC-KY alliance contributed to Obote’s decision to abolish all of Uganda’s kingships in 1967. The lost counties issue, which had revolved around Bunyoro’s royal history and genealogy, helped bring the dynasty to an end. Only in 1993 was Bunyoro’s kingship restored (Mutibwa, 1982, pp. 292–95).

Conclusion

What is interesting about Bunyoro is that the way in which genealogies were both employed and understood changed significantly over the course of the colonial period. Most obviously, the value of genealogies for colonial officials seems to have declined in the post-second world war, modernising colonial world, meaning that alternative sources of political pressure developed instead. Yet the antiquity and glory of the ruling dynasty did remain central to the propaganda produced by Banyoro during the colonial period. Bunyoro may be slightly unrepresentative in the prominence of genealogical issues in its politics. This extremism is largely explained by the legacy of conquest. Bunyoro’s early colonial leadership were very aware that the rights of the Babito dynasty to Bunyoro’s throne were not accorded much weight by the British colonisers. In 1891, the British proto-imperialist Frederick Lugard told one of Buganda’s leading chiefs that he was thinking of making him the next king of Bunyoro (Perham & Bull, 1959, vol. II, pp. 157–58). British officials, having deposed two of Bunyoro’s kings within four years, in 1904 considered whether they shouldn’t simply incorporate Bunyoro within Buganda, bringing the Babito dynasty to an end. So Bunyoro’s kings were particularly concerned to emphasise the legitimacy of their line, to ensure their survival in office, as much as to advance the cause of the lost counties. In Bunyoro, to an unusual extent, the politics of genealogy were the politics of insecurity. Commonly, though, this kind of insecurity in Africa has deepened ethnic tensions, but in colonial Bunyoro the opposite seems to be true. In many parts of colonial east Africa the migration from heavily settled regions to areas with low population density was the cause of conflict and tension (e.g. Berman, 1990, p. 409). In Bunyoro, however, the emphasis on dynastic links with the ancient Kitara empire seems to have played a role in facilitating the absorption of immigrants from across the region. Bunyoro’s kingship, having argued that it was the true heir to the enormous, multi-ethnic Kitara empire, which stretched into Rwanda, Congo, Tanzania and Kenya, was unusually enthusiastic in welcoming immigrants from Rwanda, Kigezi, Nandi and Maragoli. In the early 1940s, the white Kenyan writer Elspeth Huxley recorded a conversation she had with King Winyi in his palace.

‘We need more people’, said the Mukama. Startled at such an unusual remark, the reverse of all one generally hears, I suggested that there should be no difficulty; in Kenya, for example, tens of thousands of Wakamba and Kikuyu families were short
of land. 'I should welcome Wakamba and Kikuyu,' the Mukama said. 'They were our people once.' (Huxley, 1944, p. 233)

Even today, the official Bunyoro-Kitara website informs African-Americans that they are 'in every way our own people.' The king of Bunyoro 'would like to assure them that Bunyoro-Kitara is still their home and they are welcome to visit and stay anytime' (www.bunyoro-kitara.com). These quotations give a fair impression of the slightly unreal, nostalgic nature of modern royal politics in Bunyoro, but they are a useful reminder of how restricting self-created stereotypes can be. Bunyoro, until relatively recently, does seem to have been a more inclusive, tolerant society than any of the other ancient kingdoms in this region, and the genealogical construction tying Bunyoro to a multi-ethnic past has, it seems, played some role in that. Invented or manipulated pasts can be a force for social inclusion and stability.

Notes

[1] Int. 24, 1996. Interview transcripts are in the author’s possession.


[8] Petition to the Governor from 63 Mubende Residents, 1 December 1931, Rubaga Archives, Kampala, A3/B7/203T.


[12] Int. 41.


[16] Dundas to Dawe, Native Affairs memo, 7 September 1943, P.R.O., C.O./536/208.

[17] Evidence before the Commission of Privy Councillors, London, 10a.m. 8 February 1962 (document in author’s possession).

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