

Ethnicity and Nationhood in Pre-Colonial Africa: The Case of Buganda

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Abstract:

While recent historical scholarship has attempted to read back the existence of nations into medieval Europe, a similar revisionism has yet to take place amongst scholars of Africa. Here I take up the case of Buganda, a pre-colonial kingdom on the northern edge of Lake Victoria in what is now central Uganda. I show that Buganda in the mid-19th century fits various definitions of both ethnic groups and nations, while its neighbors largely do not. Thus the Bugandan case both demonstrates further evidence for the existence of pre-modern nations and illuminates the great variety of pre-colonial identities present in Africa.

Introduction

From being seen a generation or two ago as a continent full of “tribes,” Africa has more recently been re-examined in light of Western theories of ethnicity and nationhood. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s “tribes” have been replaced by “ethnic groups” in the literature, while at the same time a burgeoning literature on ethnicity and nationalism in Africa has emerged.¹ Much ink has been spilt on the colonial and post-colonial periods, and there have even been some attempts to rethink the origins of ethnic groups in the pre-colonial period.²

Yet within this increasingly large body of scholarship there has sadly been little attempt to understand the concept of nationhood as applied to pre-colonial Africa. This is surprising in light of recent work which has argued for the existence of a select number of nations in medieval Europe,³ whose state formations have long been considered at least somewhat comparable to those in pre-colonial Africa.⁴ The one exception to this lacuna is Adrian Hastings’s *The Construction of Nationhood*, whose analysis of medieval England (on which he spends two chapters) or Europe more generally (four chapters) is considerably more detailed than his discussion of pre-colonial Africa (one chapter).⁵

In this article I examine the pre-colonial African kingdom of Buganda, located on the northern shores of Lake Victoria in the centre of what is modern-day Uganda. I argue that there are good reasons to claim that Buganda constituted a pre-colonial nation-state, with its inhabitants, the Baganda, as an example of a pre-colonial nation. In comparing Buganda to other polities and groups in Africa’s Great Lakes region I also show that there is more evidence of Bugandan nationhood than for its neighbors. Thus this article suggests that ethnic and national identities in pre-colonial Africa should henceforth be seen as falling on a wide spectrum of forms similar to the spectrum of identities attributed to pre-modern Europe.

Historians are very clear on the existence of Buganda as a strong kingdom prior to British rule, and thus it makes less sense to ask here *who* were the Baganda than to ask *what* they were, namely, subjects of a kingdom, an ethnic group or a nation. Thus, before examining varying conceptions of nationhood and how these apply to pre-colonial Buganda, I first examine theories of ethnicity and their applicability in the Bugandan context. In both contexts I examine how other pre-colonial polities and groups in the Great Lakes region fail to meet the same standards of Buganda, before concluding with some wider thoughts on ethnicity and nationhood in pre-colonial Africa.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity as a modern political phenomenon has been prolifically documented over the past few decades, in particular as regards the developing world. In Africa colonial boundaries divided ethnic groups across states in some cases and included large numbers of ethnic groups within their borders in most cases. Attempts in the post-colonial period at fashioning supra-ethnic national identities, however, have largely failed, with many African states caught up in ethnic violence and conflict at various points in time.⁶

In Uganda ethnicity has proved to be even more salient as a political force than in many other African states. Not only has the absence of any significant non-African settlement limited the racial tensions that have plagued other former settler colonies, but it has a very high level of ethnic diversity, with one recent data set on ethnic fractionalization recording it as the most ethnically fractionalized country in the world.⁷ National governments in Uganda have thus either been coalitions of various ethnic groups or ultimately unsuccessful attempts to dominate the state with the support of only a few numerically small ethnic groups, as under Idi Amin's rule in

the 1970s; none have been successful at representing all major ethnic groups in government.

However, in attempting to understand ethnicity and politics in Uganda or elsewhere very few scholars also attempt to understand both ethnicity and nationhood conceptually. Many scholars are unwilling to see ethnicity and nationalism as interrelated phenomena: Elie Kedourie, for instance, dismissed ethnicity as “highly plastic and fluid,” and therefore unsuitable as a basis for national identity.⁸ Another set of authors, especially within anthropology, see ethnicity as necessarily relational and thus lacking in essential characteristics.⁹ Nonetheless, if our goal here is to examine what kind of entity Buganda was in the late pre-colonial period, we need to use essentialist definitions as a means to compare Buganda to her neighbors as well as other historical examples of ethnic groups and nations. In order to accomplish this task I employ two attempts at defining ethnicity through various criteria, namely those of Anthony Smith and, as an example of a larger group of scholars, Adrian Hastings.

Smith argues that the essential characteristics of ethnic groups, or ethnic communities as he calls them, are “a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific ‘homeland,’ and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population.”¹⁰ Smith does not consider any one element essential – except, perhaps, for a proper name – therefore allowing the “plasticity and fluidity” that is so characteristic of ethnicity (and that Kedourie so highly disliked). There is also a sense in which Smith’s definition is redundant, since he himself admits that one attribute, a common culture, can be “embodied in myths, memories, symbols and values,” even though a “myth of common ancestry” and “shared historical memories” constitute attributes in and of themselves.¹¹ In any case, one can say that the more of these attributes a group shares, the more one should consider it an ethnic group.

Hastings, however, argues that “an ethnicity is of its nature a single language community.”¹² In other words, Hastings agrees with a large number of scholars who see ethnicity – and sometimes nationhood – as defined by a common language.¹³ Among others, Smith disagrees with this conflation of ethnic and linguistic groups, singling out scholars who “persist in regarding language as the distinguishing mark of ethnicity, a standpoint that leads to gross simplification and misunderstanding... [since] language is one of the most malleable and dependent cultural categories.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, the popularity of this definition means that one should include it as a measure of ethnicity here. Thus, along with the notions of common descent, a unique name, a common history, a common culture, a common territory/homeland and a sense of solidarity in Smith’s definition, Hastings’s emphasis on language gives us seven attributes of ethnicity among these two definitions, which I shall now examine in order.

Common Descent

A belief in common descent is apparent in pre-colonial Buganda in the emphasis the Baganda put on Kintu, the first *Kabaka* (king) of Buganda, whom Reid calls the “most potent symbol of Ganda identity.”¹⁵ Especially since the 1760s, when the then *Kabaka* created a new initiation rite brought Kintu more prominence,¹⁶ Kintu has held a prominent place among the Baganda as both the mythical first man – early missionaries had no problem equating him with Adam of the Genesis story – and as the first Muganda.¹⁷ The founding myth of Buganda relates how Kintu came from a distant land and started the first family – and thus the first clan – in Buganda.¹⁸ Therefore, Ray claims, “the hero of the myth and guarantor of its outcome is Kintu, who, as the principle of patrilineal-clan procreation, ensures that all the clans will gain children and thus that life will continue.”¹⁹ Thus survival of the clan system ensures the survival of Kintu’s progeny, namely the Baganda themselves,

who continue to call themselves “the descendants of Kintu [*Baana ba Kintu*] as an expression of national pride.”²⁰

This belief in common descent among the pre-colonial Baganda is different from other societies in the region where competing origin myths proliferate. For instance, in Burundi one myth puts the kingdom’s origins in the Buha court of modern-day Tanzania, while another places the events in Rwanda.²¹ Moreover, in many of the regions’ kingdoms the ruling elite was seen as originally foreign and the lower classes were seen as indigenous. This has been most famously the case with the Tutsi, who supposedly originated in Ethiopia, and the supposedly indigenous Hutu in Rwanda and Burundi, but is also true of the Ugandan kingdoms of Bunyoro and Toro, whose Babito rulers are said to have emigrated from northern Uganda centuries ago. Busoga, to Buganda’s east, also fails to have a unifying myth of common descent, since some rulers in its northern and eastern parts were thought to have originated in Bunyoro while the rulers and their subjects in the south were considered to be native to the region or from father east.²²

A Unique Name

The word “Buganda” has for centuries been used to describe the kingdom centered around the county of Busiro and along the nearby shores of Lake Victoria. In the traditional Buganda foundation story Kintu arrived in Buganda, then an uninhabited country. The word supposedly comes from a mythical ancestor, perhaps the original name of *Kabaka* Kimera, usually considered the first non-mythical king of Buganda, or Kintu’s son or even Kintu’s father.²³ It is in the last myth where Buganda is also the brother of Bemba the snake, whose feats are commemorated as part of the coronation ceremony on Budo hill near Kampala, where today there is a shrine simply titled “Buganda.”²⁴ Alternatively, John Roscoe suggested that the name comes from the first place Kintu slept when he arrived in Buganda.²⁵

Whereas there has thus never been any ambiguity about the name of Buganda, other ethnic groups in the region have been called different names over time, several of which have been coined by outsiders. For instance, the Nyamwezi in western Tanzania were first called as such by outsiders in the early 19th century; inasmuch as it was used by coastal people to refer to those living in between Lakes Tanganyika and Victoria the word “Nyamwezi” possibly translates as “people of the new moon.” The term was initially ignored by the Nyamwezi, who continued to refer to themselves by their chiefdoms.²⁶ Similarly, the immigrant Nubian ethnic group of Uganda have variously been called “Sudanese” and “Nubis,” inasmuch as they were seen by locals to have emigrated from either the Nuba mountains of central Sudan or Nubia in northern Sudan.²⁷ Finally, the name of the Acholi of northern Uganda originated as either “Choli,” “Shooli,” “Shuuli” or “Sooli” in the late 19th century, either as a Sudanese Arabic name for a local interpreter or merely as the local Luo word for “black.”²⁸ Even today, suggests Sverker Finnström, as many Acholi define their native language as “Luo” as claim “Acholi,” with many of his informants using “the Luo denomination when we discussed their cultural belonging in the context of the wider history of migrations in the region.”²⁹

A Common History

Shared historical memories are abundant in Buganda, both physically in the shrines of all previous *Kabakas* that are scattered around Busiro and orally in the way all shrine custodians learnt to repeat the names of all previous *Kabakas* – plus their respective wives and chiefs – in chronological order.³⁰ Indeed, the shrine custodians, who only answered to the spirits of the dead *Kabakas* whose shrines they guarded, would often have a greater knowledge of history than the court functionaries. The custodians were quite often from distant parts of Buganda, and held ceremonies at the shrines at the beginning of every full moon which involved the

local community.³¹ Thus the shrines played a major part in uniting the Baganda around common historical rituals: they “contained the historical legacy and the dynastic traditions by which Buganda understood itself.”³²

In contrast, due to a common court monopoly of historical records, other interlacustrine kingdoms have poorly recorded histories with a legacy of constant rewriting of royal genealogies and an inability or unwillingness to separate history, religion and legends. Bunyoro’s royal historians, for instance, expanded their royal genealogies from five to twenty-three kings between 1875 and 1935, in large part to compete with Buganda’s kinglists.³³ Burundi is even more problematic, inasmuch as, for “all intents and purposes, [it has] no [pre-colonial] history at all.”³⁴ Indeed, Lemarchand notes that “the difficulties in separating historical fact from fiction are nowhere more daunting than in Burundi,”³⁵ while Wrigley writes that Burundian oral history was merely “a repetitive blur of stories... Narratives that probably refer to nineteenth century events are hard to separate from myths of the origins; and insofar as the history of Burundi has been reconstructed it is because the names of its rulers are sometimes mentioned in Rwandan sagas.”³⁶

A Common Culture

As I have already noted, Smith considers both myths of common descent and shared historical memories “differentiating characteristics of common culture.” However, one could easily show that pre-colonial Bugandan culture consisted of more than these two attributes, especially in regards to religion and food. First, a singular Bugandan religion was common to all Baganda, with a variety of deities called *lubaale* to whom temples and priests were devoted. While *lubaale* were considered former clan members, they could be and were worshipped by all Baganda, since “it was the question of locality, not of kinship, that decided to which of the prophets an inquirer should go.”³⁷ Indeed, according to Mair this is one of several

“peculiarities” that “distinguish it from the religious ceremonies of Bantu Africa” along with the lack of any regular obligatory ceremonies.³⁸ In other words, pre-colonial Bugandan religion should be considered a “differentiating characteristic” of Bugandan culture.

Second, communal eating was a common feature among the pre-colonial Baganda. Feasts took place for a variety of occasions, including the birth of twins, the naming of a child, marriages and burials. Furthermore, the clan system of Buganda was and is predicated on the basis of food taboos: each clan is named after something edible which the members of the clan are not allowed to eat. While some of these taboos associated with the clans were also practiced by other ethnic groups in the interlacustrine region, the names of the clans as well as their traditional clan lands were unique to Buganda, as was the one-to-one correspondence between taboo and clan.³⁹ Aside from these clan taboos, the Baganda shared a common cuisine, based on green plantains. Indeed, these plantains are such a staple that the word for them, *matooke*, also means “food” in general, and they mark one of the more important differences between the Baganda and their neighbors to the north, the Banyoro, who traditionally rely on grains as their staple food.⁴⁰

A Common Territory/Homeland

The pre-colonial “homeland” of Buganda can easily be identified as the area along Lake Victoria centered around the area of the royal shrines at Kasubi and around Busiro. After the acquisition of the southern area of Buddu around the year 1800, Buganda stopped expanding in size, and the last two pre-colonial *Kabakas* Suna and Mutesa (who, put together, ruled Buganda from 1824 to 1884) “were content to consolidate the gains of their predecessors and to encourage the peaceful settlement of border areas.”⁴¹ This meant that “chiefs – and subjects – in all areas of Buganda were equally subject to the *Kabaka’s* central power.”⁴²

Thus Buganda's external boundaries were marked to the point where "the Ganda state had, as it were, sharp edges: one was either in it or outside it."⁴³ While Lake Victoria, the Nile and other bodies of water made Buganda's borders easier to define and defend, its military and political power also allowed it an unusual ability to control its territory. As Ray notes,

Buganda's borders were also maintained through ritual means. Human and animal victims, called *byonzire*, were taken across the border to Bunyoro and Busoga and sacrificed, both to rid Buganda of dangerous diseases and to "cleanse" Buganda's armies when they returned from military expeditions.⁴⁴

Similarly, there were four major *lubaale* shrines located at the four compass extremes of the kingdom, symbolically defending Buganda from its foreign enemies. They were dedicated to the plague god Kawumpuli (facing north), the war god Kibuuka (west), the second war god Nnende (east) and the lake god Mukasa (south).

This geographical distinctiveness can be contrasted, for instance, with many other parts of the Great Lakes region. For instance, Burundi on the eve of colonial rule was fragmented between a core region around the capital controlled by the *Mwami* (king) and outlying regions ruled over by various princes and chiefs.⁴⁵ In Rwanda the tripartite local government administration of army, cattle and land chiefs only properly functioned in the center of the state, while the peripheral populations on the edge of the state "were perceived pejoratively as not very 'Rwandan'."⁴⁶ In pre-colonial north-west Tanzania, Buhaya, or the land of the Bahaya people, only referred to "the fishing villages on the coast" of Lake Victoria in the eastern part of the region,⁴⁷ while Chrétien notes how neighboring area of the Baha was already split geographically and dynastically between north and south before it was split again into five separate polities in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Similarly, due to a long history of slave trading, fluctuations in the borders of local state and other factors, "it is not possible to speak of Buzinza, the country of the Zinza [in modern Tanzania], in the sense that one can speak of Buganda or Bunyoro"⁴⁹ Yet Bunyoro presents its own

problems in this regard, as it is the successor state to the once large kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara which formerly controlled most of southern and south-west Uganda and which slowly saw its power ebb from the 17th century through the advent of British colonial rule in the 1890s. There were thus many areas of Uganda such as northern Busoga and what now constitutes northern Buganda which were in a loose and tenuous relationship with Bunyoro: “although in theory the *Mukama’s* [king’s] power was absolute, in day to day matters his authority declined as one approached the peripheral areas of the kingdom.”⁵⁰ Thus, Beattie argues, in some areas “it would have been difficult to say where the Nyoro state ended,” thereby negating any claim to an easily-defined Bunyoro homeland.⁵¹

A Sense of Solidarity

The strongest marker of solidarity among the pre-colonial Baganda was undoubtedly the clans, which served to give a Muganda both “social identification and group membership.”⁵² As already noted, the Baganda are divided up into various clans, each of which is named after a food taboo to members of the clan. It has long been common wisdom that these clans are older than the institution of the *Kabaka*, which over centuries gradually took power away from the clans. Indeed, clans continue to function as the basis for Bugandan identity: without clan membership, a person cannot be a Muganda, even if they have Baganda ancestors. The head of a clan, named the *mutaka*, would also be the owner of the clan estate, which contained the traditional burial ground – each known as a *butaka* – where, it was claimed, all of its members were once buried. Up until the 20th century clan members could still claim the right to be buried on their clan land if they so wished.

The Bugandan clans, however, did not each have a separate sense of ethnic identity. Indeed, there is no historical evidence for any significant inter-clan warfare or conflict in Bugandan history. Clan members were not allowed to marry each other,

and, as there was no real hierarchy among the clans, Bugandan society therefore grew strongly interlinked over time. Each child took on the clan membership of its father, except the *Kabaka*, who took on the clan membership of his mother since a royal clan did not exist. The *Kabaka's* mother's clan was always the most powerful clan at any given point in time; however, it was rare that the same clan would be lucky to claim two such Queen Mothers in successive generations.⁵³ Thus, "clanship served as a powerful tool for organizing societies, creating alliances, and developing notions of collective well-being."⁵⁴

This system is in direct contrast to other pre-colonial societies in the area like Busoga, where members of the royal family "were distinguished from commoners through strongly marked differences in speech, behavior and power."⁵⁵ In other kingdoms the royal clan (the Babito in Bunyoro and Toro and the Bahinda in Ankole and the Haya kingdoms) always provided rulers for the state: for instance, in Toro "clans were arranged in a hierarchical order of status, first the royal Bito, then the clan of the reigning queen mother," and down to "those who which had at one time been punished by a king and were obliged to provide sacrificial victims on occasion."⁵⁶ In Bunyoro this split between the royal clan and the rest of the populace led to "a tendency for government to collapse, because large sections of the people were not interested in seeing that the kingdom survived... Buganda, on the other hand,... could inspire loyalty in all its subjects by allowing them to participate in national affairs."⁵⁷

Buganda was even more dissimilar in this respect to the stratified systems of Ankole, Rwanda and Burundi, where society was split between cattle keepers (Bahima in Ankole; Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi), farmers (Bairu in Ankole; Hutu in Rwanda and Burundi) and, in Rwanda and Burundi, an underclass group named the Twa (Pygmies). In Ankole the "political elite was drawn almost exclusively from the Bahima segment of the population, whereas the Bairu stood largely outside direct political involvements in the state system and in a variety of areas enjoyed lesser

rights and privileges in their contacts with the Bahima,” and intermarriage between the two groups was very extremely limited.⁵⁸ Similarly, from the early nineteenth century onwards Tutsis dominated the Rwandan monarchy and court, holding such positions as cattle chief almost exclusively, while Rwandan kings could only marry Tutsis “from one of the three ‘matridynastic’ clans.”⁵⁹ This evidence should not be taken to suggest that the two groups were therefore separate ethnic groups in all three cases, and historians have fiercely debated whether these groups were more akin to separate ethnic groups, classes or castes and the degree to which mobility between the two groups existed.⁶⁰ Regardless of these distinctions, however, it is merely enough to note that such divisions did not exist in pre-colonial Buganda.

Language

It was clear to the British when they arrived that the Baganda shared a common language spoken among all members, namely Luganda. Attempts by 19th-century European missionaries to use Luganda to preach to Banyankole and Banyoro failed, thereby demonstrating the linguistic uniqueness of Luganda and its association with the Baganda.⁶¹ Similarly, although Luganda is most similar to Lusoga, the spoken language of the Busoga region east of Buganda, the languages are not similar enough that attempts have been made to merge them, as has been done with the consolidation of Lunyoro, Lutoro, Lunyankole and Luchiga into Runyakitara in western Uganda.⁶² Indeed, the status of Luganda as a common tongue among the Baganda as well as a language of prestige can be seen in the multiple writings of Bugandan Prime Minister Apolo Kagwa, whose 1901 book *Basekabaka be Buganda* (The Kings of Buganda), was the “first indigenous history of a sub-Saharan society written in an African language.”⁶³

Likewise, Luganda’s homogeneity can be contrasted with other languages in the region at the time. For instance, Lusoga was split into two dialects: Lupakoyo,

spoken in north-east Busoga and related to Lunyoro, and Lutenga, spoken in south-west Busoga and closer to Luganda.⁶⁴ Similarly, the Ateso language of eastern Uganda was split among three dialect groups in the pre-colonial era, namely the Iteso in what is now northern Teso, Iseera in the southwest and Ngoratok in the south.⁶⁵

Thus Buganda meets the criterion of Hastings's definition as well as all six criteria of Smith's definition ethnicity examined here, despite the fact that Smith claims that these criteria need not all be present in every ethnic group. In other words, unlike other examples examined here one should not be hesitant in calling pre-colonial Buganda an ethnic group; whether it was a nation, however, is a subject I take up next.

Nationhood

Nations are much trickier to define than ethnic groups, partially because of the status associated with the word itself: to be considered a "nation" in contemporary international society gives a group a putative moral right to self-determination. Furthermore, to complicate matters, the word "nation" has the same meaning as "ethnic group" in Luganda – both are denoted by the word *ggwanga*⁶⁶ – as is true in other languages around the world.⁶⁷ Indeed, for this reason many authors generally fail to distinguish between the two concepts and therefore either define nations in terms similar to ones which we have already examined above in relation to ethnicity.⁶⁸ Others claim that the difference between ethnic groups and nations is that, while "an ethnic group may be other-defined, a nation must be self-defined... Until members themselves are aware of the group's uniqueness – until this uniqueness emerges as a popularly held conviction – there is merely an ethnic group and not a nation."⁶⁹ Yet this attempt at separating the two concepts becomes problematic when one discusses ethnic groups which are self-defined and aware of

their uniqueness but which do not claim to control a state, as is indeed true for most ethnic groups in contemporary Uganda and elsewhere in Africa.

Hastings and Smith have, however, defined ethnic groups and nations in more concrete and successful terms. Hastings argues that a nation “is far more of a self-conscious community than an ethnicity... It possesses or claims the right to political identity and autonomy as a people, together with the control of specific territory.”⁷⁰ Hastings’s definition thus incorporates King’s emphasis on self-consciousness while leaving open the option of a group either actually possessing – as in the case of Buganda – or claiming “the right to political identity and autonomy,” thereby allowing for nations that already are in possession of a state as well as those that are not.

Smith, on the other hand, defines nations as those entities with “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members.”⁷¹ Smith would thus differentiate nations from ethnic groups by the following: the latter “need not be resident in ‘their’ territorial homeland; their culture may not be public or common to all the members; they need not, and often do not, exhibit a common division of labor or economic unity; nor need they have common legal codes with common rights and duties for all.”⁷²

As regards Buganda, Hastings provides his own answer to the question of nationhood, writing that

Nineteenth-century observers encountering the Baganda were profoundly impressed by the scale, power and cultural confidence of their society. *If there existed one nation-state in nineteenth-century black Africa, Buganda would have a good claim to be it.* It had grown over centuries; it had a strong sense of its own history, centralized government, an effective territorial division in counties (*Saza*) and possessed in its clan organization a horizontality of social consciousness to balance the verticality of royal and bureaucratic rule.⁷³

In addition, Hastings notes the way a “quite self-conscious national identity” could be found in early twentieth-century Luganda literature and the way its century-long history made this identity “no longer easily open to change.”⁷⁴

Smith’s definitions, however, require us to show that pre-colonial Buganda enjoyed a common economy and common legal rights. (I have already shown that the Baganda were most definitely resident in their homeland, while their culture, as should be obvious in regards to their religion and eating habits, was common to all members.) The first case is relatively easy to show due to the power of the Bugandan state to control the local economy. All Baganda were subject to taxation, “the universality of which underlined central government’s managerial role and formed a critical component of the concept of national sovereignty” in Buganda.⁷⁵ Similarly, inasmuch as war was considered “a communal activity, binding the community in collective action,”⁷⁶ all adult men fought in the army and navy. Indeed, the Bugandan economy was remarkably well integrated for a pre-colonial state in sub-Saharan Africa, in contrast to Ankole, where economic exchange between Bahima and Bairu was only occasional: “generally the two groups were inclusive, self-sufficient and each basically dependent only on their own means of production; in a sense, the one could do without the other.”⁷⁷

Second, although the Bugandan state was undoubtedly a violent and semi-despotic monarchy, it had some common laws and rights. As with the local government system, where there was no concept of a strict hierarchy beyond that between two civil servants, “nothing is more alien to Ganda culture than the conception that men may be arranged into discrete and internally homogenous strata.”⁷⁸ Kiwanuka noted the “remarkable... equality of opportunities” in pre-colonial Buganda, where “the absence of a royal clan, a permanent aristocracy and the equality of clans facilitated the building up of a system whereby a young man of humble birth could enter the civil service at court and sometimes rise to a position of considerable importance.”⁷⁹ Indeed, rather than recognized as a discrete part of

society, *Bakopi* (commoners) were defined as anyone not an administrator or a member of the royal family, thus making it more a status category than a status group. Most of these *Bakopi* were peasants and therefore also *Basenze* (clients) of their local chief, whom they would give some of their labor in return for land.⁸⁰ If peasants felt slighted they could transfer their allegiance to another chief or wait until a new chief came along, since chiefs were usually transferred after a few years of service in an area. Land was also tied to these local offices and not individuals, and was thus seen as a symbol of political power, not an end in itself.⁸¹

These common laws and rights were not shared among other peoples in the pre-colonial Great Lakes region. For instance, the ruling Bahinda clan in the Haya kingdoms of what is today northeast Tanzania was the only clan allowed to marry endogamously,⁸² while Stenning has noted the “differential legal and political statuses of Iru and Hima” in pre-colonial Ankole. Specifically, “in cases involving Hima and Iru, the latter were at a disadvantage; there was no redress, for example, for the kinsfolk of an Iru killed by a Hima.”⁸³

Thus it seems clear that Buganda qualifies as a nation under the two definitions examined here. Indeed, many other authors have also had confidence in declaring Buganda a nation. In 1902 Sir Harry Johnston wrote of the “whole nation of the Baganda,” while more recently the historian Richard Reid has claimed that “Buganda was the pre-colonial nation-state *par excellence*.”⁸⁴ More specifically, the scholar Lloyd Fallers noted that

Nineteenth-century Baganda were highly nationalistic – unusually so among African peoples. They were acutely conscious of their uniqueness and mutual kinship and their institutions and culture were to a marked degree organized around the nation as a whole and its well-being.⁸⁵

Other authors have avoided calling Buganda a nation but have nonetheless given national attributes to the Buganda “people,” as with the late *Kabaka* Mutesa II’s claim that “the Baganda have a common language, tradition, history and cast of

mind.”⁸⁶ Another group of admittedly non-objective observers, namely a group of Buganda kingdom leaders, similarly wrote in a 1993 letter to President Yoweri Museveni that

By the time the colonialists arrived in this part of Africa, the Baganda were already [a] single people traditionally fixed on a relatively well-defined territory, speaking the same language, possessing a distinctive culture (a social organization system based on patrilineal exogamous totemic clan lineages with the *Kabaka* as its head) and shaped to a common mould by many generations of historical experience.⁸⁷

From a more academic perspective Michael Karlström has written that early European visitors saw Buganda as a nation because it was a “well-established, centralized, territorially based state with a long continuous history, a subject population conceived in terms of shared descent and characterized by relative linguistic and cultural homogeneity.”⁸⁸

However, Karlström claims that pre-colonial Buganda fails two tests as a nation, leading him to write that there could only “be a sort of Ganda nation.”⁸⁹ His first objection is that population movements plus the incorporation of new areas in the nineteenth century meant that a large number of residents of Buganda were not Baganda. Thus claims to common historical memories and a common myth of descent would appear to be problematic.

However, this first objection is only somewhat valid. In attempting to prove his point Karlström notes that “conquered populations were culturally and linguistically assimilated and incorporated into the clan system,” claiming that this process showed how, in the pre-colonial Great Lakes region, “individuals moved quite fluidly between different polities and the identities associated with them.”⁹⁰ Yet nations have assimilated conquered populations and immigrants for centuries, beginning with the assimilation of Normans in medieval England, considered by Liah Greenfeld and other scholars of nationalism as the oldest nation on earth.⁹¹ That the Normans, once assimilated, did not then later return to their previous identity is

more a sign of the strength of medieval English identity rather than its weakness.⁹² Indeed, one could argue the exact opposite of Karlström, in that rather than being a sign of the fluidity of identities, assimilation is actually a sign that a given nation has a strong sense of identity and can absorb new members without completely altering its previous identity.

Buganda in this sense does look a good deal like medieval England in its ability to assimilate conquered or conquering peoples, as Bugandan “society of the 18th century was largely open, and aliens and people of humble birth were readily admitted to [the clans’] ranks.”⁹³ A prime example of this is the area of Kooki, in present day Rakai district, which fell into a Bugandan sphere of influence in the 18th century and came under direct Bugandan control along with Buddu (now Masaka district) in the 19th century. Three of the seven Kooki clans were added to the Bugandan clans and their ruler, the *Kamuswaga*, was allowed to continue to rule in return for help in conquering more territory for Buganda, while their commoners were allowed to become important in court society.⁹⁴ Their language, though it may be now only reduced to an accent, was not suppressed by the Baganda, and their kingdom survives to this day. As for Buddu, which was formerly part of Bunyoro, its original inhabitants were not treated as colonial dependents and continued to have their original clans and administrative divisions and titles until the early twentieth century.⁹⁵ Indeed, the indigenous inhabitants of Buddu became Baganda in a quick amount of time: no nineteenth-century European explorer of the area recorded either an indigenous language or even a local accent though Buddu was only conquered around 1800.⁹⁶

Karlström’s second objection is that the supreme role of the *Kabaka* made the Baganda subjects rather than citizens: “the nation, in a strong sense, *was* the king.”⁹⁷ In other words, “collective transcendence was located in the person of the king and mediated through the clan heads; it did not inhere in the aggregated population of ordinary Baganda.” This objection, however, is not as valid as the first. Again, it is

enough to cite England and France as two of the earliest examples of nationhood, both of which were monarchies where the residents were subjects rather than citizens. Indeed, Karlström fails to recognize the role the *Kabaka* has had in unifying the Baganda rather than dividing them: without a royal clan, all clans were equal under the *Kabaka*, and all members of society could potentially become a member of the royal family.

Conclusion

The above analysis has suggested that pre-colonial Buganda both qualifies as an ethnic group and a nation under several different definitions, and that many of her neighbors do not fit the same conditions. The analysis, however, requires three caveats. First, the unusually strong sense of nationalism which linked Baganda together in the pre-colonial came at a price, namely that of a violent society. For instance, while the lack of a royal clan helped to integrate the Bugandan royal family with its subjects, its cost was political instability upon royal succession, a problem which was eventually solved in the late eighteenth century by executing rival claimants to the throne.⁹⁸ Moreover, war was integral to the creation and maintenance of Bugandan identity, both in the aforementioned way that serving in the Bugandan armed forces brought together Baganda from different parts and strata of the kingdom as well in the way that “many of the signs and symbols of Ganda national identity were to be found in the kingdom’s highly sophisticated military culture.”⁹⁹ As in Europe, where war historically contributed to the development of modern states and national identities,¹⁰⁰ Buganda’s constant warfare helped in developing a powerful state structure which integrated its subjects into a common economy and in sharpening the differences between Baganda and non-Baganda.

Secondly, this article should not suggest that pre-colonial Buganda was some sort of archetypal nation, especially since recent historians has questioned some of

the conclusions of earlier scholarship. For instance, Chrétien has noted that the Tutsi/Hutu split plays little to no role in the origin myths of Rwanda, which were quite cohesive in the nineteenth century and thus not radically different from those of Buganda. He and others have suggested, moreover, that European colonialists did much to play up the differing origins of the regions' kings and commoners, thereby erasing former origin myths which did not rely on a foreign conqueror.¹⁰¹ As regards Buganda itself, Doyle claims that the Bugandan kinglists were actually probably no more accurate than those of Bunyoro, since the Baganda merely revised their genealogies before the arrival of Europeans and thereby hid their tracks.¹⁰² Reid has noted the way natives of the Ssesse islands in Lake Victoria were considered inferior by other Baganda and, according to Johnston, were even suspected of being cannibals.¹⁰³ Finally, Kodesh has also argued that there existed a certain level of inequality among clans, whereby five claimed to be "indigenous" to Buganda while members of others such as the Grasshopper clan claimed to descend from Bahima cattle herders in modern-day Toro.¹⁰⁴

While these points are relatively minor, more problematic, however, is the existence of slaves in 19th-century Buganda. These slaves, who were either captured in war or descended from those who were captured, were distinguished by the fact that they were not members of Bugandan clans and therefore were barred from becoming chiefs, "a position reserved for people who could prove that they were Baganda by tracing their ancestry back to the original founders of the clan."¹⁰⁵ Unlike other Baganda, slaves could not own property, and when they died their bodies did not receive the funeral rites granted to other Baganda but were merely thrown into the forest.¹⁰⁶

Nonetheless, female slaves could marry members of indigenous Bugandan clans and thereby become clan members, and "slaves could reach top positions in the royal palace" due to the mobility of Bugandan society.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that, as in the antebellum US and ancient Greece,¹⁰⁸ the Baganda saw their

slaves as not ethnically Baganda, inasmuch as they were largely drawn from the neighboring regions of Bunyoro and Busoga, and that seizing slaves actually “articulated a continually developing sense of ethnic or even ‘national’ superiority” in Buganda.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, as with warfare, it is possible that slavery served the purpose of helping to strengthen national bonds in Buganda.

A third and final caveat is that Buganda, while perhaps more of a nation or an ethnic group than her neighbors, was not alone in her sense of ethnic and national identity in pre-colonial Africa. In southern Africa, for instance, there is evidence of a pre-colonial Zulu identity, with “boundaries that were at once cultural and geographical” separating them from surrounding peoples such as the Tonga and Lala. Geographical markers included the home of King Shaka’s grandfather, styled “the birthplace of the nation,” and the tomb of deceased Zulu kings in Emakhosini valley. Cultural divisions like food taboos, cooking, dress and circumcision “all became markers defining the borders of the kingdom,” while various national ceremonies brought people from all parts of the kingdom together. Moreover, there was some evidence of uniformity and solidarity within the kingdom as well, inasmuch as the king forced all Zulu men to join his army and his harem was made up of women drawn from across the kingdom.¹¹⁰ Finally, just as in Buganda there was evidence that, as the Zulu kingdom expanded under Shaka in the early 19th century, it was able to assimilate other groups who submitted to its rule over a similar time span, with groups such as the Qwabes self-identifying as Zulu by the early 20th century.¹¹¹

Similarly, in West Africa there is some evidence of a pre-colonial ethnic Ashanti identity. On the one hand there were large cultural difference between residents of the Ashanti capital, Kumasi, and outlying regions, many of which “had strong national feelings of their own” and therefore refused to vote in favor of a restored Ashanti confederacy in the 1930s.¹¹² However, on the other hand the Ashanti state had various unifying ceremonies and symbols such as the *Odwira*

harvest festival and the Golden Stool. Indeed, British colonial officials were impressed by Ashanti nationhood to the point where one commissioner wrote that

In Ashanti we have before us a people who have a common faith, a common past and a common thought; whereas in the Gold Coast colony we are dealing with a congeries of peoples who possess *inter se* but mutually antagonistic rivalries, high-sounding pretensions and intolerant parochialisms. I think it is clear that the claim of the Ashantis that they form a distinct nation, leading a life apart from the Colony peoples, must be admitted to be a genuine one.¹¹³

As such, the foremost historian of the Ashanti, Ivor Wilks, has written of “the historic nation that was Asante” and how the anti-colonial war of 1900 “was no struggle of Asante commoners against their rulers, but a war of *national* liberation against the British.”¹¹⁴ While I do not have time to go into more detail here, clearly there is the potential for future research into the Zulu, Ashanti and other cases from around Africa as additional pre-colonial examples of ethnic groups and nations.

These three caveats aside, it is clear that the coming of the Arabs and Europeans and the establishment of British colonial rule in the late 19th century did much to destroy a good deal of whatever national solidarity existed in Bugandan society. Foremost was the introduction of Islam in the 1860s and Christianity in the 1870s, which left Buganda – and Uganda – divided among Catholics (who now comprise some 42% of the current population of Uganda), Anglicans (39%) and Muslims (5-11%). No longer did a single religion unite Buganda, and these divisions would come to play a very large role in colonial and post-colonial politics in Buganda.¹¹⁵

Just as important as the religious split was the enactment of the 1900 Agreement, the treaty drawn up in the eponymous year between the British and the Bugandan government after the establishment of the Ugandan Protectorate. By granting half of all land in Buganda to the *Kabaka* and 3000 high-ranking chiefs as private freehold property, the Agreement created a landed aristocracy in Buganda for

the first time. Thus, ironically, it was under colonial rule that Buganda began to look more like the feudal society that early European visitors had mistakenly thought it to be in the pre-colonial period.¹¹⁶

The third and final major change brought about by colonial rule was the expansion of Buganda's borders into areas which it had never before controlled. Collaboration with the British in the late 19th century brought under Bugandan control areas where most of the inhabitants were Banyoro. This expansion meant that the Bugandan homeland and the territory controlled by the Bugandan government were no longer the same, a situation which would continue to plague the Bugandan and Protectorate governments until a referendum rectified the issue in 1964.¹¹⁷

Thus, with the possible exception of the abolition of slavery in the 1890s, Buganda under colonial rule looked much less like a nation than it had in the 1860s. This conclusion may be surprising in the context of recent scholarship on the "invention" of ethnicity under European colonial rule, where colonial administrators, missionaries and anthropologists all played a role in solidifying and creating new "tribal" identities out of what were previously "kinship groups and political units."¹¹⁸ Indeed, other case studies have indeed shown that "there is now ample evidence of what has been called the 'invention of ethnicity,' by which is meant the ways in which it was constructed and instrumentalized during the colonial period."¹¹⁹

Yet here again is where the difference between ethnicity and nationhood matters: while other kinship groups may have been "invented" as ethnic groups in the colonial period, the evidence collated here suggests that Buganda was demoted from being a nation to an ethnic group at the same time, thus flattening what were large and obvious differences between these groups in the pre-colonial period. In other words, not only has the existence of the pre-colonial Bugandan nation-state been a major factor behind many of the political problems faced in Uganda since its creation, but just as important has been the non-existence of other nation-states in

the region at the time. The inequalities between different parts of Uganda that have persisted to the present day are thus rooted in the differences between these regions in pre-colonial period which, it is hoped, this article has helped to explicate.

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³ John Gillingham, *The English in the Twelfth Century: Imperialism, National Identity and Political Values* (Rochester, NY: Boydell, 1999); Kathy Lavezzo (ed.), *Imagining a Medieval English Nation* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Susan Reynolds, "The Idea of the Nation as a Political Community," in Len Scales and Oliver Zimmer (eds.), *Power and the Nation in European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴ John Beattie, "Bunyoro: An African Feudality?," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1964), pp. 25-35; Edward I. Steinhart, "Vassal and Fief in Three Lacustrine Kingdoms," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, Vol. 7, No. 28 (1967), pp. 606-623; Claudine Vidal, "Économie de la société féodale rwandaise," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, Vol. 14, No. 53 (1974), pp. 52-74.

⁵ Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

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¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hastings, p. 31.

¹³ David Laitin, *Nations, States and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), is perhaps the most prominent example here, along with the numerous scholars who employ the "ethno-linguistic fractionalization index;" cf. William Easterly and Ross Levine, "Africa's Growth Tragedy: Policies and Ethnic Divisions," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 112, No. 4 (1997), pp. 1203-1250.

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¹⁵ Richard Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), p. 5.

¹⁶ Neil Kodesh, "Beyond the Royal Gaze: Clanship and Collective Well-Being in Buganda" (PhD Dissertation, Department of History, Northwestern University, 2004), pp. 263-264.

¹⁷ "Muganda" is the singular of "Baganda." Benjamin Ray, *Myth, Ritual and Kingship in Buganda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 71.

¹⁸ Christopher Wrigley, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 90-92.

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