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Published on H-Africa (July, 2003)

Challenging the Fathers?

The Kingdom of Buganda is one of the few pre-colonial polities in Sub-Saharan Africa that can boast substantial academic scholarship reaching back forty years and written primary sources (both Ganda and western) from before the end of the nineteenth century. It is thus a place where scholarly debate, rather than the reconstruction of basic knowledge, is now possible. An older generation of Buganda scholars, fascinated with the anatomy of a centralized kingdom that seemed to resemble the European feudal system, concentrated on the analysis of elite politics at the center of power. However, that line of inquiry was cut off when political events in Uganda (1971-1986) prevented scholars from doing in-country research. Richard Reid, as part of a new generation of academics who came into Uganda during the changed political climate of the 1990s, sees himself building on, rather than overtly challenging, the political scholarship of his intellectual fathers. Although the book’s title promises a further look at Ganda political power, Reid largely delivers an economic analysis, while relying on the political analysis of his forefathers, in hopes that a new synthesis will eventually result. His goal is “to examine the material basis of Ganda political power” (p. 2).

The book is divided into four sections dealing with the productive economy, public labor, trade, and the military. Although not explicitly revolutionary, Reid’s book raises the contradictions in the older political scholarship to the point where the need for a new synthesis becomes acute, but ultimately not realized. Reid’s book, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda*, is a welcome harbinger that a new generation of scholars, who are ready to begin a serious debate about politics in pre-colonial Buganda and ultimately challenge their intellectual fathers, has emerged.

What Reid does best is to provide careful empirical data on the productive economy, trade, and warfare by combing through the existing traveler’s, missionary, and colonial accounts, the early histories of the kingdom written by educated Ganda, clan histories, and other archaeological or archival sources. In this book we find descriptive detail on, for example, barkcloth manufac-
ture, kinds of spears and canoes used in war, changes in currency, and the organization of naval fleets. Scholars in other parts of Africa lacking this kind of documentation will envy these sources, even though, as Reid asserts, they are not straightforward nor do they reach back much before the mid-nineteenth century. Although scholars have hashed over this material many times previously, Reid is asking new questions and finding new insights. As Reid acknowledges, his perspective is surely influenced by the fact that he wrote this book while teaching in Eritrea at the University of Asmara during the war, and by his admiration for the new Africanist scholarship on the economic and commercial aspects of political power.

On the basis of this rich documentation Reid offers a number of important claims about pre-colonial Buganda. First, he demonstrates that the economy was not static until the arrival of Arab and European commerce—rather, specialization and trade flourished. Permanent settlement and the development of a state were made possible by highly favorable geographic conditions and banana cultivation. Yet, contrary to the stereotypical colonial accounts, neither did Africans live in an indolent state of luxury, picking abundant food from the trees when they liked. The existence of famine food, spiritual and ideological means for addressing the fragility of life, and political mechanisms for distributing wealth all point to an economy where scarcity was not unknown. In fact, it was this search for resources and land that led Buganda into imperial expansion. When Buganda began trading with coastal Arabs in 1844 they built on much older local trade systems, including a variety of currencies, commercial networks, and markets for salt, iron, barkcloth, and other commodities. The domestic economy was sophisticated and complex, ever responsive to both outside and inside pressures to adapt and change.

A second important assertion in Reid's book is a corrective to established chronologies, demonstrating that Ganda imperial power was on the decline, rather than at its zenith, when colonial rule was established at the end of the nineteenth century. Reid shows throughout the book, with a number of different kinds of evidence, that Buganda was in a state of political turmoil caused by famine, widespread abandonment of farms due to civil war, cattle disease, and, with depopulation, the onset of sleeping sickness. The extent to which the kabaka's power base was slipping is demonstrated by the 1888 revolt, which resulted from Kabaka Mwanga's abuse of the system of reciprocity, plundering the people by demanding too much labor and too many taxes. Reid depicts the kabakas after Kamanya (1790s-1820s) as presiding over a state of military decline as they struggled to maintain stability. When ivory became scarce, the state increasingly turned toward slave trading and the use of slave labor at the expense of internal stability. Reid also makes the important connection between the increase in slavery and the decline in women's position in society. Women became much more vulnerable to sale and capture during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Reid then argues that women, in male-dominated Ganda society, became economic assets, with the exception of women in the royal family or spirit mediums. Yet this seems to be an important exception and their roles might point to broader Ganda cultural principals, once the norm, that were violated by the nineteenth-century slave trade.

Thirdly, Reid argues that Buganda's expansion and state power depended on developments in war and commerce. The need for resources promoted expansion, which in turn brought wealth to the nation and more aggression. Buganda nurtured an increasingly militaristic state culture as constant warfare became necessary to maintain regional hegemony. The climax and eventual fall of Buganda in Reid's story centers around the decision to restrict Arab trade to the southern lake
route (1879), along with the attempt to control lake trade and gain access to resources, including slaves, through building a powerful navy. The Ganda navy was at its height in the 1870s and 1880s as it controlled an informal empire all around Lake Victoria, connected to Arab trade routes at the southern end. Yet Reid demonstrates that Buganda, in its arrogance, had over-reached its ability, and its armies were increasingly too big and cumbersome to respond quickly on the battlefield. They used the navy to compensate for military failures on land but failed to control ambitious young men who had access to guns and who were influenced by new religious loyalties. Reid’s account, while describing in detail the remarkable Ganda military machine, seeks to “demolish the myth of Ganda military prowess” (p. 249).

Finally, Reid claims that Ganda imperial power was more informal and less centralized than earlier scholars had assumed. The polities incorporated into Buganda through conquest paid tribute but were not under direct administrative rule. Trade in iron and other commodities before the Arab trade was not strictly controlled by the central government, although the kabaka certainly profited from it. With the exception of the kabaka’s capital, land chiefs in the provinces supervised markets and exacted their percentage. Even the public works projects, like building roads, bridges, buildings, and armies, were organized at the local level. Chiefs coerced their people to work for the state in return for land from the kabaka on the basis of local patron-client relations. However, Reid also points out the enormous state capacity for coercion and control over trade and labor. As the coastal markets developed, the state increasingly mobilized its war machine to capture slaves and to control resources. However, even at the height of its power, one might rather describe Buganda as a loose, flexible, and diverse alliance of territories managed at the center with varying degrees of success by the kabaka’s court.

Although Reid demonstrates all of these important assertions through rich empirical evidence, one is still left with the feeling that he has not sufficiently challenged his fathers, that he is taking too much of the older generation’s political interpretations for granted. Reid seems to accept uncritically European models of political organization that assume the evolution of a centralized state. For example, we learn that the regalia and ritual surrounding the kabaka, and indeed the founding myth itself, includes references to the productive economies of farming, herding, and hunting, as well as the crafts of iron and bark-cloth. But what are we to make of this in terms of the political ideology that it represents? How did blacksmiths turn the respect and dignity ascribed to their craft into political capital? How did they wield this power? Reid is surely right that this empire was decentralized, but the evidence seems to suggest that we really do not know how it was organized. With so much recent work among African historians on the concept of wealth in people and reciprocity, it is astonishing that Reid does not take advantage of this rich literature to better theorize his evidence. Reid takes terms like “taxation,” “centralization,” “public labor,” or “clans” as known entities. One wonders whether these need to be redefined in Gandan political terms before we can understand the material basis of political power. Reid also tantalizingly assumes an understanding of a patron-client system of reciprocity that allows the kabaka to get labor and taxation from the chiefs in return for land. But why is the kabaka the legitimate owner of the land? What do peasants get in return for their labor? What holds the system together? Clearly the synthesis work that will explain a political ideology grounded in a Ganda conceptual framework and changes in material relations remains to be done. Let the great Buganda debates begin!
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