

A Bakiga Myth

One of the most common statements about the Bakiga is that they didn't have kings and were generally anti-authoritarian. It was frequently stated by colonial officials, western researchers and, today, by the Bakiga themselves as a matter of identity and pride. However it is not quite true as a general statement because the 'anarchy' reported in Kigezi in the early 20th century was a function of particular events over the previous 50 years.

An analysis of mountain societies in the mid-19th century shows a settled political system with interdependent relationships between ruling and other clans. In Kigezi there were six major units, Rukiga, Rubanda, Ndorwa, Kinkiizi and Kayonza while Bufumbira was sometimes part of Rwanda and other times independent. Usually a rainmaker clan was the chieftain clan with about 4-5 subsidiary clans that had specific roles, blacksmiths, drum makers, potters, etc. They paid tribute in cattle and agricultural produce, the Batwa provided forest tributes, but all were represented in the chieftain's court as officers with specific responsibilities and rights.

Many of the rainmaker chieftains were of pastoral Bashambo origins but had assimilated many aspects of mountain agriculture over the previous centuries and were cultural hybrids fully assimilated into mountain society as leaders. The exceptions were the Bakiga kings of Kinkiizi and Kayonza who had few pastoral ancestors except via intermarriage with neighbouring Mpororo and Rujumbura.

In southern Kigezi social order collapsed from about 1860 to 1910 under the cumulative effects of invasion, famine and disease. The Rwandan king, Rwabugiri having conquered what is now northern Rwanda next invaded Kigezi three times but while he was successful in the short-term was unable to maintain power and retreated usually with plenty of plunder. The conquests and invasions resulted in large migrations northwards of disaffected people, who in turn displaced ruling dynasties in the Basigi Uprising. This destroyed social networks and suddenly it was every clan for itself.

Rinderpest arrived in the late 1880s; it killed 95% of cattle in Uganda and caused widespread famine and cattle raiding. It also killed most the deer and that affected the Batwa and others who relied on hunting while cutting off an alternative that was usually available in times of hardship. A knock-on effect was that lions and leopards were without their main source of food and as cattle were scarce they became man-eaters and were a problem until the late 1930s. Then two three year droughts arrived around 1895 and 1905 and caused major mortality, cannibalism was reported but this is disputed.

In the middle of this chaotic time when anarchy was rife and strong clans preyed on the weak, three warlords arose to take advantage of the political vacuum, Basebye, Muhumuzu and Katuregya. They might have been successful had not European invaders arrived and put paid to their ambitions. In Rwanda and Kigezi the Germans and English saw a deeply divided society and thought it normal. Their perception gained currency and became accepted by the Bakiga themselves.

Kinkiizi and Kayonza are examples of successful Bakiga kingdoms that survived and prospered until conquered by the English and their territories incorporated into Kigezi District.