

# Names Have Histories

The history of names is not the same as the history of the people who bear those names, particularly if they have been imposed by others.

## Names have histories I

Who are the Bakiga and Bafumbira? There are many complicated and contradictory theories as to the origins of these two groups. Here is a different theory: The English came up Lutago Hill and asked for its name and were told Rukiga. The English then said therefore you must be Bakiga and also called the language after the place. They then extended the name to all Rukiga speakers as they moved southwest until they came to Rufambira speakers who they called Bafumbira (early names: Mufumbira and British Ruanda).

In other words the original definitions of Bakiga and Bafumbira are the speakers of those languages; it is of colonial origin as a 'tribal' classification and was used systematically by them and later researchers, beginning with Edel and Roscoe. It was during the colonial period that people of Kigezi learnt to use these terms to identify themselves and is an example of how some African identities evolved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

However there is no evidence that Kigezi people ever identified themselves as such before 1900; tribes did not exist except in the minds of Europeans; clans were the main identifier. Clan histories are of primary importance in understanding the history of what became Kigezi from c. 1600. There are c. 45 clans speaking both or either language, which is noteworthy because such a high density of clan identities is rare in Sub-Saharan Africa but maybe correlated with mountain areas, for instance Mount Elgon also has a high number of clan identities, but the situation in the Rwenzori Mountains is less clear.

The reasons are various: clan expansion from densely populated areas, Rwandan conquest and independence from pastoral kingdoms, better climate and fertile land. One also needs to forget modern day political boundaries and treat the uplands around the Virunga massif as a unit, the southern section being only relatively recently conquered by Rwanda while the northern section successfully fended off invasion until the English arrived.

However the vast majority of clan histories belong to 17<sup>th</sup> century and later migrant clans, which has resulted in the loss of history of those who lived here from at least 2,000 years previously but were absorbed or displaced. There are fleeting references to them in some of the earliest clan myths but, as there is no archaeology, their presence can only be inferred from swamp pollen records. As for the history of the Bakiga and Bafumbira identities, that belongs to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One question: Is Rukiga as the name of the language a colonial definition or was it used prior to their arrival? The relationship between clans and language is of importance in understanding why some clans speak one or the other and also to understand and reconstruct origins, history and migration.

## Names have Histories II

Who are the Batwa? Early European descriptions are very clear: there were two types of forest dwellers in central Africa. First were the pygmies who lived in the Ituri Forest and were solely dependent on its resources with, from the late 1800s, a side-line in tourism as they became an iconic must-see attraction of early Western travellers. Second were the Batwa who lived on the forest

margins and traded with their agricultural neighbours and usually accepted the leadership of the local kings by paying tribute and serving in his court.

For instance the Kinkiizi king's pipe lighter was a hereditary Batwa role and the holder was one of the most important courtiers. Batwa paid regular tribute to Kayonza kings and were equally favoured. There is no evidence that the northern Batwa were involved in independent raiding like their southern counterparts; their political decline is a result of English conquest of Kinkiizi and Kayonza.

This interdependence was of long standing and originates from the first agricultural settlement in the mountains. Over time, as the forests were progressively cleared, more and more forest dwellers and farmers developed integration and trade as part of their mutual livelihood strategies. This no doubt included marriage, which explains why mountain farmers tend to be smaller than lowlanders while the Batwa tend to be taller than pygmies.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century pygmies were only found in the dense forests west of the Rift Valley with one exception. Christopher Pitman, Uganda Game Warden, described (1930s) a small family unit of about a dozen adults who lived in Kayonza (Bwindi) Forest who said they were not Batwa but of the same origin as the Ituri Forest pygmies. They also claimed that the Ituri pygmies originally came from Kayonza. They were Pitman's main allies for the management of mountain gorillas; he trusted them completely and believed they were best suited for gorilla preservation.

It may be assumed that integration was part of the political landscape of southern Kigezi up to the 1860s. However with the collapse of society, inter-clan relationships broke down cutting the Batwa adrift. They found various solutions; many became mercenaries and servants in the Rwandan court which led to their involvement in the Basebye rebellion, alliance with Kataregye and Nyindo. Unfortunately for them all their allies were defeated by European invaders and they ended up as outlaws (Batwa) in their own lands until English District Commissioners brought them to peace in the 1920s.

They reverted to their traditionally peaceful existence with added income as guides to hunters, scientists and photographers. This latter income was cut off when Uganda went through post-independence political instability that culminated with their uncompensated eviction at the end of the last century when they were dispossessed of their ancestral homes and livelihoods.

Their history is otherwise little explored and is mostly multiple Bakiga complaints of raids by unnamed 'Bad Batwa' who made off with, in order of importance, their cattle, weapons, beer and wives. There is little sense of individuals, families or clans, livelihoods or traditional culture. Their history needs to be recorded through extensive interviews with elders before they die out and their knowledge lost forever.

### Names have Histories III

Is it Lake Bunyonyi or Bunyoni? If the translation of its name as the place of the little birds than Bunyonyi is correct as birds is spelled enyonyi. But is this translation correct?

The earliest reference to the bird translation comes from CMS missionaries who probably took their version on the basis of their knowledge of Rukiga and may have been guided by Basigi lake dwellers. It must be noted however that the missionaries had no interest in the religion, culture and history of local people as they generally classified all this knowledge as pagan superstition of little merit to be got rid of as soon as possible.

In contrast the Catholic White Fathers were deeply involved in the reconstruction and research of history, culture and religion and were the first to write and publish their findings. Much of what we know today is based on their work. There was a network of committed historians in Uganda, Rwanda and the Congo who shared their knowledge and assisted each other in research. In Kigezi Frs. Geraud and Nicolet were major contributors while other priests played a supporting role.

In his article on the Bakiga history in Denoon's History of Kigezi (1972), Geraud states that the lake is called after the Bunyoni who were the Bashambo rain maker rulers of northern Ndurwa from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century until they were overthrown by the Basigi at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; their fall from power was hastened by their inability to counter the major drought of the mid-1890s. They left the lake and were soon forgotten.

No doubt it was advantageous for the Basigi to forget them completely so they could consolidate their power. For this reason, when the missionaries arrived, the bird translation was the most convenient and became accepted. Nowadays the tourist industry uses the bird translation as a marketing tool, it is, after all, more attractive than a pagan Bashambo clan that everyone has forgotten, while Geraud's analysis is ignored.

However the Bunyoni clan are an integral part of the lake's history and should be remembered so it is for this reason that I spell the lake with one y, as Lake Bunyoni. It is, I believe, the more likely origin of the name.