

Katwe Salt Lake Descriptions and Images

Three descriptions with images of Katwe Salt Lake by Henry Stanley, Duke of Mecklenburg and John Roscoe

In Darkest Africa Henry M Stanley, London, 1897

A few miles beyond the Nyama-gazani River, which is forty feet wide and a foot deep, clear as crystal and beautifully cool, we entered the town of Katwe, the headquarters of the Rukara, the commanding chief of the Wara Sura. He and his troops had left the town the night before, evidently I much haste that he was unable to transport the grain away.

The town of Katwe must have contained a population of about 2000. As the surrounding country was only adapted to the rearing of cattle, the population was supported by the sale of salt of the two salt lakes near it. It was quite a congeries of zeribas of euphorbia, connected one with another by mazy lanes of can hedges and milk weed enclosures.

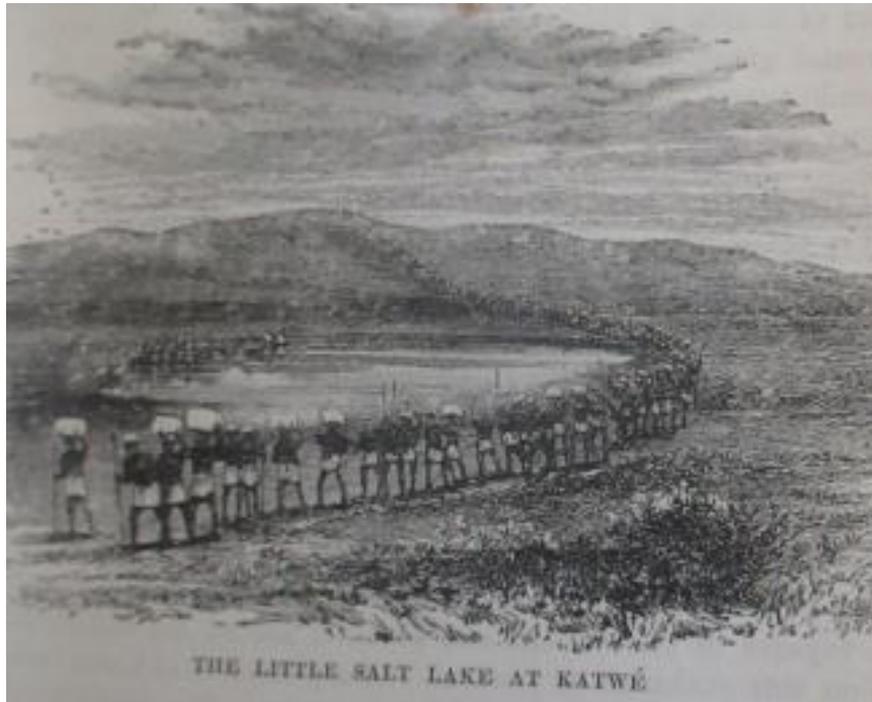
The town is situated on a narrow grassy ridge between one of the salt lakes and a spacious bay of the Albert Edward Nyanza. In length the ridge is about two miles, and in breadth half a mile from the shore of one lake to the other.

By boiling point the Albert Edward Nyanza is 3307 feet, the crest of the grassy ridge of Katwe is 3461 feet, and the Salt Lake is 3265 feet above the sea. So that the summit of the ridge was 154 feet above the Salt Lake and 112 feet higher than the Albert Edward Lake, and the difference of level between the two lakes was 42 feet. The town is situated in 0° 8' 15" south of the Equator.

After seeing to the distribution of corn, I proceeded across the ridge, and descending a stiff slope after 154 feet of descent, came to the dark sandy shore of the Salt Lake of Katwe, at a place where there were piles of salt lying about. The temperature of the water was 78.4° Fahrenheit; a narrow thread of sulphurous water indicated 84°. The flavour was of very strong brine. Where the sand had been scooped out into hollow beds, and the water of the lake had been permitted to flow in, evaporation had let a bed of crystal salt of rocky hardness, compacted and cemented together like coarse quartz. The appearance of these beds at a distance was like frozen pools. When not disturbed by the salt gatherers, the shore is ringed around with *Ukindu* palms, scrubby bush, reed cane, euphorbia, aloetic plants; and at Mkiyo, a small village inhabited by salt workers, there is a small grove of banana, and a few fields of Indian corn and Eleusine corcana. Thus, though the lake has a singular dead and lonely appearance, the narrow belt of verdure below the cliffy walls which encompass it is a relief. Immediately behind this greenness of plants and bush, the precipitous slopes lie in a series of horizontal beds of grey compacted deposit, whitened at various places by thin incrustations of salt. There are also chalky-looking patches here and there, one of which being examined, proved to be of stalagmite. In one of these I found a large tusk of ivory, bones of small animals, teeth, and shells about the size of cockles. There were several of these stalagmite beds round the lake.

One remarkable peculiarity of the lake was the blood tints of its water, or of some deposits in it. On looking into the water I saw that this deposit floated, like congealed blood, on and below the surface. A man at my request stepped in – the water was only up to his knees – and brought up a solid cake of

coarse-grained crystalized salt, and underneath it was a blood-red tinge. This reddish viscous stuff gave the lake, when looked at from the crest of Katwe ridge, a purple appearance, as though crimson dye had been mixed with it.



Hundreds of dead butterflies of various colours strewed the beach. There was not a fish seen in its waters, though its border seems to be a favourite haunt for herons, storks, pelicans, egret.

The larger Salt Lake of Katwe, sometimes called Lake of Mkiyo, from the village of that name, is about three miles long, and ranges from half to three-quarters of a mile in width, and about three feet deep. The smaller lake is a round grassy basin about two miles east, and is a round shallow pool half-a-mile across.

Everyone acquainted with the above facts will at once perceive that these salt basins are portions of the original lake occupying sunken hollows, which were left isolated by the recession of the waters of the Albert Edward Lake and that evaporation has reduced the former sweet waters into this strong brine.

Salt is a valuable article, eagerly sought after by the tribes round about. The reputation of this deposit has reached Kavalli, where I first heard of the greater Salt Lake as 'Katto'. Flotillas of canoes come from Makara, Ukonjo, Unyampaka, Ankori and Ruanda, loaded with grain, to barter for this article. Caravans arrive from eastern Ukonjo, north Usongera, Toro and Uhaiyana, to trade millet, bark cloth, beans, peas, tullabun or eleusine, sesame, iron tools, weapons, etc. for it. The islanders of Lake Albert Edward freight their little vessels with the commodity, and with dried fish make voyages to the western and southern shores, and find it profitable to carry on this exchange of produce. The possession of Katwe town, which commands the lake, is a cause of great jealousy. The Wasongora owned it formerly, then Antari of Ankori. Kakuri the island chief, became heir to it, when finally Kabba-Rega heard of the rich deposits, and despatched Bukara to occupy the town.

Our march into Ukonjo had instantly caused the Wara Sura to evacuate the plain of Makara, and our approach to Katwe had caused a speedy flight of Rukara and his army of musketeers and spearmen. Wakonju, to the number of 150 men in our camp, and Wasongera were joining, and supplying us with information gratuitously.

In the afternoon of the first day's arrival at Katwe we saw a flotilla of canoes approaching from an island distant about three miles from the shore. The crews were cautious enough to keep just within hail. We were told that they had been sent by Kakuri to ascertain what strangers were those who had frightened Rukara and his Wara Sura from the land, for they had done good service to Kakuri and "all the world" by their acts. We replied in a suitable manner, but they professed to disbelieve us. They finally said that if we "burned the town of Katwe they would accept it as a proof that we were not Wara Sura". Accordingly, the villages near the shore were fired, and the crews cheered the act loudly.

The speaker said, "I believe you to be of the Wanyavingo now. Sleep in peace, and tomorrow Kakuri shall come with gifts to give you welcome."

Then Bevwa, chief of our Wakonju, stood on a canoe which was in the lake, and asked, "Ah, you children of Kakuri, the great chief of the sea, do you remember Kwaru-Kwanzi, who lent Kakuri's sons the spears to defend the land from the Wara Sura robbers? Lo! Kwara-Kwanzi, a true son of the Wanyavingi, is here again. Rejoice, my friends, Rukara and his thieves have fled, and all the land will rise as one man to follow in pursuit of them".

The crews clapped hands, applauding, and half-a-dozen little drums were beaten. Then the principal speaker said, "Kakuri is a man who has not had a tooth drawn yet, and he is not going to have one drawn by any Mrasura alive. We have caught a dozen Wara Sura as they were flying from Makara because of these strangers. Kakuri will see that they will die before the sun sets, and tomorrow he will see the chief of the strangers face to face."

When they had paddled away, Bevwa was questioned as to these Wanyavingi, What were they? Were they a tribe?

Then Bevwa looked hard at me and said:

"Why do you ask? Do you not know we believe you to be of the Wanyavingi? Who but the Wanyavingi and Wachwezi are of your colour?"

"What, are they white people like us?"

"They have no clothes like you, not do they wear anything on their feet like you, but they are tall big men, with long noses and a pale colour, who came, as I heard from our old men, from somewhere beyond Ruwenzori, and you came from that direction; therefore you must be Wanyavingi."

"But where do they live?"

"Ruanda, and Ruanda is a great country, stretching round from east of south to S.S.W. Their spears are innumerable, and their bows stand higher than I. The king of Usongora, Nyika, was a Myavingi. There are some seen in those parts whom Kabba-Rega cannot conquer, and those are in Ruanda; even the king of Uganda will not venture there."

When Kakuri appeared next morning he brought us gifts, several fish, goats, bananas and beans. Some Wasongora chiefs with him agreed to accompany us, in the hope that we should fall in with some of Kabba-Rega's lands, as we journeyed towards Toro and Uhaiyana. The island chief was physically a fine man, but not differing in complexion from the dark Wakonju; while the Wasongera were like us in features to the finest of the Somali types and Wa-galla as though they were of the same race.

Kakuri was requested to bring his canoes in the afternoon, and freight them with salt to deposit on his island, as I would have to continue my journey eastward in a day or two. Therefore all afternoon about 100 islanders were busy transporting salt to Kakuri Island, and the Wakonju who followed us did a good business by assisting them. They walked into the lake to a distance of 100 yards, the depth being up to their knees, and stooping down, conveyed great cakes of the crystalized salt to the shore, and across the ridge to the canoes in the Albert Edward Lake.

Having found a cumbrous and heavy canoe, but somewhat large, on the 19th it was manned with twelve men, and I set out to explore. At about 11 am I had got a distance of eight miles, and halted in front of Kaiyura's settlement, which consisted of eighty-one large huts, and was rich in goats and sheep. The craft in which we were voyaging was to clumsy and lopsided to venture far out into the lake, for with the slightest breeze the water leaped in, but I was quite a mile from the shore during most of the trip, and the lead was cast every few minutes, but the deepest water I obtained was fifteen feet, while it sank over three feet in soft ooze. About 400 yards from the shore a long sounding pole was used, and each time it dropped four feet into the ooze, which emitted a stench like that of a sewer when it came out.

In the early part of the day the face of the Lake was smooth as a mirror, of a grey-green colour. The shore was remarkable for the great number of butterflies, and many floated dead on the surface of the water.

There were two islands standing in the middle of Katwe Bay, and rising about 100 feet above the water. One of them was distinguished for a chalky-coloured cliff. They contained large settlements, and were evidently well populated.

On returning to Katwe, I saw a great black leopard about 250 yards off, just retreating from the Lake side, where he had been slaking his thirst. He disappeared before we could paddle the unwieldy craft nearer the shore.

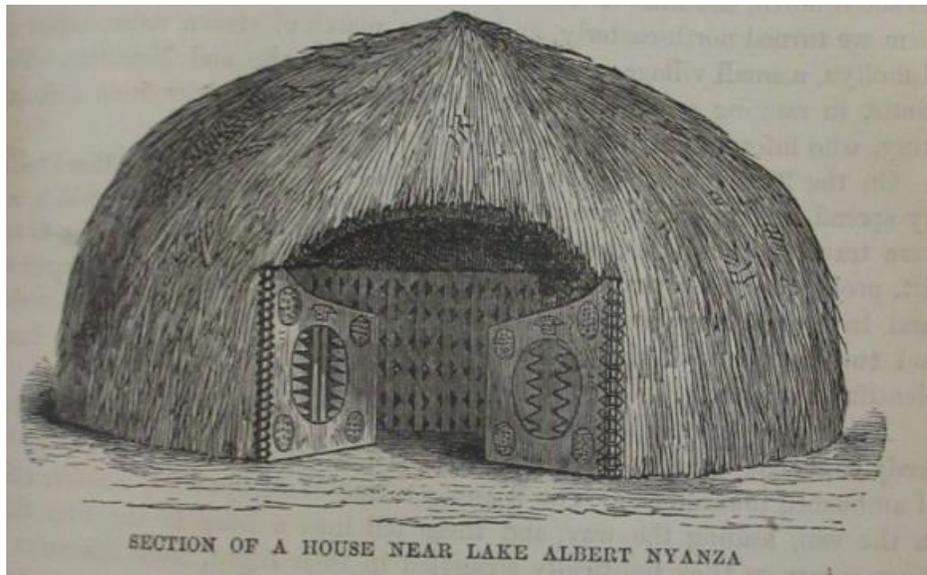
The only advantage I derived from my day's exploration was the complete survey of the bay, and obtaining a view beyond the headland of Kaiyura into the formless void. The haze was as thick as fog, and nothing could be distinguished further than three miles.

On the 20th of June we marched out from Katwe, and escorted by a large number of Wasongora chiefs and herdsmen, and our Wakonju friends, filed to the eastward, along a path that skirted the great Salt Lake, and dipped down into the grassy round basin of the lesser briny lake. Surmounting the ridge eastward of the basin, we descended into a great plain, which evidently had but recently been covered with the waters of the Albert Edward. We passed by several narrow tongues of swamp, until, after a march of eighteen and a half miles, we arrived at Makungu, in Toro, Kassesse, the name of its chief, was made familiar to me in January, 1876.

Opposite the half-dozen zeribas of Mukungu was the long low island called Irangara. A narrow arm of the Lake, almost covered with pistia plants, about 150 yards across, wound round it, and between the islands

of Katero, Kateribba, and four or five others to the east of Irangara. Far across through the mist loomed the highlands of Uhaiyana, and to the south we had the faintest image of Kitagwenda, Chief Ruigi, and I knew then that we stood west of the arm of the lake we had called Beatrice Gulf in 1876.

The cattle of the people of Mukungu had been driven across into the island of Irangara, and everything of value had been carried away, and a monstrous herd had but lately left for Buruli, evidently urged to fast travel by the retreating Rukuru and his army. The huts of the chiefs showed that the people of Mukungu were advanced in the arts of ornamental architecture.



A house which the Pasha occupied was one of the more ornate I had seen. The hut was twenty feet in height and about twenty-five in diameter, with a doorway brilliant in colouring, like a rude imitation of the stucco work of the primitive Egyptians. The doorway was ample – six feet high and six feet wide, with a neat arched approach. Plastered partitions, in which were sunk triangles and diamond figures, line of triangles surmounting lines of diamonds, the whole painted red and black, divided the interiors into segments of circles. One division before the wide doorway was intended as a hall of audience – behind the gaily-decorated partition was the family bed-chamber; to the right were segments of the circle devoted to children.

Every zeriba, besides being protected by an impenetrable hedge of thorn-bush, had within a circular dyke of cow dung, rising five feet high. These great circular heaps of refuse and dung were frequently met in Usongora, and will remain for a century to indicate the site of settlements, when village and generation after generation have disappeared.

The river-like arms of the Lake, now narrowing and broadening, swarmed with egrets, duck, geese, ibis, heron, storks, pelicans, snipes, kingfishers, divers and other water birds.

The next day we followed the track of Rukara and his army and droves, and made a westerly and then northerly course to round the prolonged arm of the Lake called Beatrice Gulf. A few years ago it must have spread a great distance. The plain was perfectly flat, and long-reaching, shallow tongues of water projected far inland, which we had to cross. As we advanced north, the hills of Toro appeared in view, and having approached them we turned north-easterly, and after a march of eleven miles, halted at Muhokya, a small village, equidistant from the Lake and Mountain. The scouts, in ranging around the outskirts, captured a deserter from Rukara's army, who informed us that the Wara Sura were at Buruli.

On the 22nd we continued our march. A plain, level as a billiard table lay spread to our right, about forty feet below a terrace, over which we were travelling, and the south-eastern flank of Ruwenzori range lay to our left, projected into capes, terminated mostly by conical hills, with spacious land bays, reaching far inland, between. We crossed three little streams and two considerable rivers, the Unyamwambi and Rukoki, the first being plentiful strewn with large smooth cobblestones.

Arriving near Rukoki, whose banks were buried under banks of reedy can, the vanguard suddenly received a volley from a large number of ambushed musketeers. The Wasongora and Wakonju were, unfortunately, in the van, leading the way, and these fell in a heap in the river, their sharp spears, as they frantically struggled in their fright, more dangerous to us than the concealed enemy. However, the loads were dropped, and in a few minutes we had two full companies charging through the brake with admirable unconcern, just in time to see the rear-guard of the Wara Sura breaking out of their coverts. Some lively firing followed, but wars with natives require cavalry, for every person seems to be on the perpetual run, either advancing or in retreat. Some of the Wara Sura fled south, some run up the mountains to avoid the pellets of our rifles. After seeing them all in full flight, the companies returned, and we lifted our loads and resumed our march to Buruli, whose extensive groves of banana plantations soon appeared in view, and promised a rare supply of food.

Just before reaching the ambushade we had passed a slaughtered goat, that had been placed across the path, with a score or so of yellow tomato-like fruit set in some order near the bleeding throat. The natives, however, confident in our strength, had not hesitated to advance; nevertheless the ambushade was a great shock to them.

In the afternoon the Wara Sura were pursued by scouts, and ascertained to be joining their scattered parties, and proceeding on an E.N.E. course across the plains. The scouts, unable to contain themselves, sent a few bullets after them, lending an impulsion to their flight. The baggage was thrown away; the sticks were seen being applied to their prisoners, until several, frantic with fear and pain, threw their loads away, and deserted to the arms of the scouts. Many articles were picked up of great use that were discarded by the fugitives, and among the prisoners was a Mhuma woman, of very pleasing appearance, who gave us much information respecting Rukara and his vast herds of cattle.

Early next morning Captain Nelson was despatched with one hundred rifles and fifty Wakonju and Wasongora to follow up the rear guard of Rukara, and if possible to overtake the enemy. He followed them for twelve miles, and perceiving no sign of them, returned again to us at Buruli, which he reached well after sunset, after a most brilliant march.

I was told of two hot springs being some miles off, one being near a place called Iwanda, N by E from Buruli, the other, "hot enough to cook bananas", N.E. near Luajimba.

We halted two days at Buruli, as we had performed some splendid marching on the plains. The paths were good, broad, clear of thorns, stones, roots red ants and all obstructions. Before leaving this prosperous settlement, our Wakonju and Wasongora friends begged permission to retire. Each chief and elder received our gifts and parted to our regret. Bevwa and his Wakonju were now eighty-five miles distant from their homes, and their good nature had quite won our hearts.

A march of twelve miles took us on the 25th across a very flat plain, level as a bowling green, intersected by five streams, and broad tongues of swamp, until about half-way it heaved up in gentle undulations, alternated by breadths of grassy plain. Thick forests of acacia created these land swells, and on the edges of the subsident flats grew three species of euphorbia, stout fan palms, a few borassus, and *Ukindu* palms. A little after noon we camped in a forest an hour's march from the Nsongi River.

The neighbourhood had evidently been often used as camping ground by Wara Sura bands and Toro caravans bound for the Salt Lake, and as water was far, the tired cooks used the water from some pits that had been excavated by thirsty native travellers. This water created terrible sickness among us.

(From there the expedition crossed the Nsongi River went north and ascended the "lofty uplands of Uhalyana, which form, with Eastern Toro, Kitagwanda and Ankori, the eastern wall of the basin of Lake Albert Edward)

In the Heart of Africa, Duke Adolphus Frederick of Mecklenburg, London, 1910

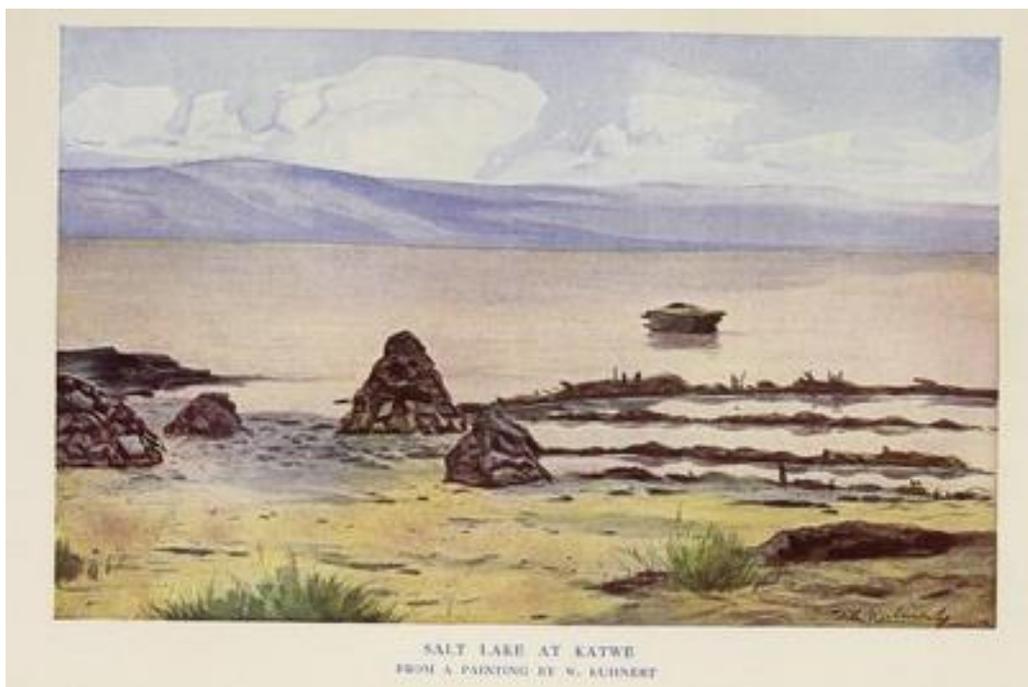


Figure 1 Salt Lake at Katwe - From a Painting by W Kuhnert

From there we visited Katwe, a place of particular interest, which is situated on a salt inland lake, and is only divided from Lake Albert by a narrow, steeply rising neck of land. At first sight the place offers an extraordinary aspect. The wonderful wine-red-colouring of the water spread out a t our feet like a sea of blood, the blue canopy of the heavens, separated by the yellow sand dunes from the ruddy water, presented a curious contrast such as we were hardly likely to meet with again.

The volume of water in the lake is considerably less than it was one time. This can be seen from the salt deposits, which cover the banks to the height of several meters. The depth of the water does not even amount to a metre. This retrogression appears to have a close association with the steady diminution of the water of Lake Albert Edward, the two lakes being connected by subterranean confluent. As the bed of the salt lake lies considerably higher than that of Lake Albert Edward, its entire evaporation within a measureable space of time is quite conceivable. In consequence of the retrogression and steady evaporation of its surface water, thick deposits have accumulated on its bed, which in the course of time have consolidated into a thick encrustation of salt. The salt is simply gathered up by a number of men, who enter the water absolutely naked and wade about collecting it. It is then packed on sledge-shaped boats, which are drawn up on to the land by other workers. Here powerful arms seize upon it, sort it out, and heap it up in pyramids of a metre high. After being broken into very small pieces it is stored in small sheds thatched with straw till it is ready for exportation.

The following method is also adopted: One of the two sides of a small ditch, flat basins, or troughs, of three to five metres square are fashioned by heaping up sand and clay. These are filled with about a foot of water taken from the ditch by means of a scoop or by hand. The power of the sun causes the water in the various divisions to evaporate rapidly, that after the expiration of six days only a salt residue remains at the bottom. The salt thus obtained is finer and whiter than that which is broken away from the bed of the lake, and therefore commands a higher price. The quantities obtained are very considerable, and not only supply a great part of Central Africa, but also find their way to the west coast of Lake Victoria, to Entebbe, and to Bukoba.

From what I have just described it will be seen that Katwe is a place of great commercial importance, so that it was no cause for surprise that some difference of opinion should have arisen as to the position of the thirtieth degree of longitude, which passes directly through it, and forms the boundary line between the British territory and the Congo State. Before the discovery of this valuable spot the meridian ran by it on its eastern side, so that its incorporation in the Congo State was undoubted. Yet after its discovery the British Colonial Office came to the conclusion that a very grave error in surveying had been committed. A very clever astronomer then succeeded in shifting the longitudinal degree to the west of Katwe, so that the town fell into British territory. On this justifiable doubts arose in the minds of the Belgians concerning the accuracy of the latest survey. In order to arrive at a final settlement of the matter, Belgian and British Commissions were again sent out, and their labours were just concluding when we arrived on the scene. These two commissions had transferred the seat of their energies to the north of the Semliki, but we were privileged a little later on, shortly before they returned to their homes, to be entertained in both their camps in the most cordial and hospitable manner.¹

¹ Modern maps give Katwe village as c. 29. 9°; 30° is c. 28.5 km to the east by the Kazinga Channel



SALT PYRAMIDS AT KATWE



SALT PANS AT KATWE

At present the monopoly of the salt industry lies in the hands of Sultan Kasakama of Toro, though after the question of its national importance has been settled for once and for all, the administration of Katwe will probably pass into more expert hands,²

² The Tooro Kingdom Archives have some records but nothing before 1955

The Soul of Africa, John Roscoe, London, 1922

Every night porters, either going to or returning from the salt-works, passed the camp at all hours. Both men and women went to fetch salt, and they travelled in small parties, three, four, or six together. Because of the heat they walked by night, shout and singing as they went along to scare off wild beasts. We heard from time to time the roaring of lions, while other animals grunted or growled around, but they never came very near our camp.

One morning as I left the men in the dim light of a setting moon and the rising sun I almost ran into some animal like a leopard; at another place my boys were anxious about my safety because a lion appeared just after I had passed along the road. I, however, had neither seen nor heard it, and went on happily, unconscious of its presence.

