Born-again Buganda or the limits of traditional resurgence in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Since the restoration of traditional leaders in Uganda in 1993, the Kingdom of Buganda has developed unusually effective institutions, financing mechanisms and policy tools, re-building itself as a quasi-state. The reinforcement of Buganda’s empirical statehood provides one of the farthest-reaching examples of the current trend of traditional resurgence in African politics and to some extent supports claims for the participation of traditional structures in contemporary political systems. Yet, the Buganda experiment also highlights the limits of traditional resurgence as a mode of reconfiguration of politics in Africa. First, it is unclear how the kingdom can maintain the momentum of its revival and the allegiance of its subjects in view of its fiscal pressure on the latter and the limited material benefits it provides to them. Already the monarchists are finding it difficult to translate the king’s symbolic appeal into actual mobilisation for development, shedding doubts on one of the main justifications for the kingdom’s rebirth. Second, Buganda’s claims to political participation clash with the competing notion of sovereignty of the post-colonial state. These limits are likely to confront other similar experiments across the continent.

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of pre-colonial political institutions across Africa. The governments of both Uganda and Ghana passed constitutional reforms in the 1990s restoring traditional leaders (Doornbos & Mwesigye 1994; Ray 1998), while in ANC-controlled South Africa some 40 per cent of the population are now ruled in part by 800 traditional chiefs (van Kessel & Oomen 1999).

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Chiefs have also seen their role increase in Mozambique (West & Kloec-Jenson 1999) and Benin (van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1999). In Tanzania, traditional **sungusungu** grass-roots associations have taken over police and justice roles (Mwaikusa 1995), while in Cameroon’s Northern Province, the sultan of Rey Bouba manages militias and prisons (Amnesty International 1998). A Rwandan ‘army of the King’ has used guerrilla actions to support the return of exiled King Kigeli V (Ofcansky 2000) and ‘Bami’ chiefs have set up a political organisation in the South Kivu region of Congo. Clans have replaced the state as instruments of collective action in Somalia (Simons 1998), and ethnic associations have been reinvigorated in the wake of structural adjustment in Nigeria, where chiefs are now demanding constitutionally sanctioned powers (Osaghae 1995; Vaughan 2000). These cases add to existing instances of formal incorporation of traditional institutions into contemporary political structures, such as Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.1

The renewed salience of African traditional political systems has generated a fair amount of enthusiasm among observers of African politics, as a potentially beneficial dimension of the ongoing reconfiguration of power across the continent. Noticing the existence of dual political authority in much of Africa, Richard Sklar (1993; 1999a; 1999b) has coined the concepts of ‘mixed government’ and ‘mixed polity’ to both describe this condition of African politics and to suggest that the acknowledgement of traditional authority, whether constitutional or extra-constitutional, can provide African states with a dose of stability at a time of rapid change and institutional weakness. Others have argued that the incorporation of traditional structures in contemporary systems could improve the governance of African states by building upon the legitimacy of pre-colonial institutions (Davidson 1992; Skinner 1998). The current emphasis on decentralisation in less-developed countries has also created a favourable context for the delegation of public authority to traditional systems at the local level (Deng 1998; Olowu 1999; Wunsch 2000). In general, the political case for the integration of traditional structures into contemporary ones has highlighted the democratic nature of recognising institutions with which many Africans still overwhelmingly identify, even though these institutions may not themselves be formally democratic (Sklar 1999a). Economists too have welcomed this new trend. In view of theories that transaction costs can be reduced as a function of the perceived legitimacy of institutions (North 1981), and that collective action is fostered by the homogeneity of group members (Olson 1967), some authors have suggested that African customary institutions may reduce
opportunistic behaviour and display a greater potential for developmental mobilisation than the post-colonial state (Ayittey 1991; Dia 1996; Englebert 2000). Either way, the integration of African traditional polities with the post-colonial state could stand to reconcile the ‘two publics’ brought about by the colonisation of Africa – one deemed primordial and moral, the other civic and amoral – which Ekeh (1975) identified as lying at the core of African corruption.

This paper looks at the case of the Kingdom of Buganda in Uganda as a first test of these hypotheses. A centuries-old kingdom, Buganda was abolished by Milton Obote in 1967, then restored by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in 1993. This restoration was at first merely cultural, leaving the kingdom in the margins of the country’s structures of governance. Since then, however, Buganda has engaged in a largely successful effort to re-create itself as a quasi-state institution, and although its lobbying efforts in favour of federalism have so far been in vain, it has by and large succeeded in creating a dual structure of power in its own region. On the one hand, Buganda’s success at state (re)formation speaks loudly of the capacity of some African traditional institutions to adapt to contemporary circumstances and function as effective state institutions. On the other hand, despite its successes, the Buganda experiment highlights the limitations of traditional resurgence and of the incorporation of traditional structures in Africa. First, it is unclear how the kingdom can maintain the momentum of its revival and the allegiance of its subjects in view of its fiscal pressure on the latter and the limited material benefits it provides to them. Already, Buganda authorities are finding it difficult to translate the king’s symbolic appeal into actual mobilisation for development, shedding doubts on one of the main justifications for the kingdom’s rebirth and on collective action theories of traditional resurgence. Second, Buganda’s claims to political participation clash with the competing notion of sovereignty of the post-colonial state and raise some significant roadblocks on the path of incorporated mixed government in Africa. To the extent that Buganda is a precursor, these problems are likely to confront similar experiments elsewhere in Africa. Yet, they may merely amend, rather than invalidate, the notion that traditional structures can be built upon to improve African governance.

BACKGROUND

The history of Buganda up to and including its restoration in 1993 has been well documented elsewhere (Apter 1960, 1967; Bertrand 1997; Doornbos 1993; Doornbos & Mwesigye 1994; Karlstrom 1999;
Mafeje 1998; Nsibambi 1994; Oloka-Onyango 1997). Buganda, which represents about 16 per cent of Uganda’s population, became a British protectorate in 1900 and provided the core for the larger colony of Uganda in which it retained significant autonomy and superior status. Fears of dissolution into an East African Federation or an independent Uganda led, in stages, to the awkward 1962 constitution, which made the kabaka (king of Buganda) the ceremonial president of the whole country, whereas most executive powers were vested into the office of the prime minister, Milton Obote. This arrangement lasted until 1966 when Obote’s troops stormed Buganda’s capital Mengo (a neighbourhood of Kampala) and the king went into exile in England. All kingdoms were subsequently abolished.

While briefly an ally of Milton Obote against Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni took to the bush in 1981 after contesting the results of the elections which brought Obote back to power, and set up the National Resistance Army (NRA), later to become the NRM. For the most part, the NRM’s 1981–86 guerrilla war against the Obote regime and the subsequent Okello government was waged in Buganda territory, in an area known as the Luwero Triangle. Local Baganda, after two decades of exaction at the hands of Obote’s and Amin’s troops, offered Museveni and his men their support with the hope that, when in power, he would return to them ‘their things’ (ebyaffe), including the monarchy and the assets seized in 1967. Crown Prince Ronald Mutebi, son of King Muteesa II who died in his London exile in 1969, first visited liberated territories in 1985, and made frequent visits thereafter. He progressively raised his visibility, touring Buganda and spearheading the organisation of popular inter-clan soccer games (‘Bika’ football), before returning for good and setting up a secretariat in 1990 to centralise the lobbying efforts in favour of ebyaffe (interview, Mayiga 1999). These efforts led to the amendment of the constitution on 13 July 1993 and to the coronation of Mutebi on 31 July.

RESURRECTING THE STATE: BORN-AGAIN BUGANDA

The history of Buganda since 1993 is a remarkable and highly unusual case of rapid state or quasi-state re-formation in Africa. After the kingdom was abolished in 1967, its clan structure alone survived, preserving only a minimal reproduction of its political system, as Buganda’s fifty-two clans retained their heads and maintained some local social control despite the disruptions of the Amin and Obote regimes. The clans provided the first building block for the recreation
The development and consolidation of Buganda’s institutions

It was not, however, until the kingdom’s restoration in 1993 that its institutional reconstruction acquired momentum. The king wasted no time creating executive, legislative and administrative structures, even though the constitution only allowed for the restoration of ‘traditional and cultural chiefs’, not of their states. Mutebi appointed a parliament (lukiiko), with representatives of districts, clan elders and other appointees, and opened its session a mere two days after his coronation. He also promptly set up a government, in many ways a modern cabinet with the portfolios one finds in its national counterpart, including a prime minister (the katikkiro) and ministries of land, public buildings, finance, commerce and industries, local government, water and electricity, information and broadcasting, education, health, agriculture, economic planning and youth, as well as an attorney general, together with fourteen ‘ministers of state’, suggesting the extent to which Mengo already perceived itself as a state.

Although most ministers are volunteers and some even use their personal assets to finance their ministry, they are sophisticated high-profile professionals, including businessmen, lawyers or university professors, making the kabaka’s government anything but a traditional ‘tribal’ structure. For example, prior to his appointment as katikkiro, Joseph Ssemwogerere was the managing director of Sembule Investment Bank, chairman of the Nile Hotel, and a former Masaka district administrator. Minister of youth Peter Mayiga is a partner in the downtown law firm Buwule and Mayiga Advocates. And Apolo Nsibambi, once the kingdom’s chief negotiator for ebyaffe, was professor of political science at Makerere University and former director of the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) before becoming prime minister of Uganda in 1998. Although the constitution bans the king from meddling in politics, there is no such prohibition for the members of his government, and the katikkiro has taken his role as spokesperson of the kingdom and advocate for its political rights to heart.

The kingdom’s rebirth is also physical. Bulange, the building housing the government, the lukiiko (in a room patterned after the
House of Commons), and Buganda’s administration (a few dozen people are employed in the kingdom’s civil service), is an impressive architectural structure with strong symbolic appeal. Four-story tall, it sits atop a hill above Kampala, facing the king’s Lubiri palace. A ten-foot statue of Mutebi stands before it while, inside, paintings of previous monarchs adorn the walls of the lukiiko.

Armed with a government, a parliament, a bureaucracy and a physical centre of power, the kingdom has also expanded beyond Kampala. In 1995, the king re-established the eighteen traditional counties (amasaza) as local administrative units (NV 21.6.1995). Sub-counties (gombolola) and parishes (miluka) followed suit in November 1997. Finally, in June 1999, the king appointed saza chiefs in each county, followed by gombolola and miluka chiefs in May 2000. In doing so, he created and staffed an administrative structure that shadows, overlaps and sections the official local state structure based on districts and local councils (‘LCs’), although the kingdom’s positions remain largely honorary and devoid of substantial institutional powers. Yet, just like the ministers in the king’s government, saza chiefs straddle different functions and identities, which give them significant local influence. Frederick Mulindwa, for example, the saza chief of Buddu county (Masaka district), is a lawyer and also serves on the Masaka district Land Board, an institution of the national government. Other saza chiefs from rural areas around Kampala also have careers and offices in Kampala. Mulindwa (interview, 2000) describes his functions as occasionally overlapping with those of the local councils, but does not perceive this as a problem, as ‘LC chairs and saza chiefs work hand-in-hand in Buganda districts because we all have the same king.’

Parallel to the reinforcement of its local structures, the kingdom has also expanded beyond the national state. In May 2000, the king appointed ‘envoys’ to Britain, Sweden and Kenya, apparently for their large Ganda diasporas (NV 9.5.2000). Both the kabaka and the katikkiro also frequently travel abroad, and on some of these occasions behave very much as would government officials. During a June 1999 10-day ‘working visit’ to the United States, for example, the katikkiro attended a Uganda–US Trade Forum in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and met with local Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island politicians, including state legislators and Congressman Patrick Kennedy (M 25.6.1999).

Any state is more than a set of formal institutions, however. It also is an idea, an ‘ensemble of affective orientations’ expressed in flags, anthems, pledges of allegiance, and in ‘theatrical projections’ such as
inaugurations, coronations, parades, and ‘rituals of national commemoration’ (Young 1994: 33–4). Buganda is not found wanting on this account either. The 1993 coronation was an impressive theatrical display of recovered statehood. The 1999 royal wedding with its abundant pageantry further contributed to the idea of the kingdom, especially as it symbolised the promise – as yet unfulfilled – of reproduction of the Buganda political system. Buganda also has an anthem, a flag, national monuments in the form of the Kasubi royal tombs (recently restored with a $100,000 grant from UNESCO) and ‘rituals of national commemoration’ such as Lubiri Day, the anniversary of the storming of Mengo by Obote’s troops. Finally, the kingdom has an ideology. Based on a claim of moral regeneration and ‘return to the village’, it is essentially conservative, and hence as contrasting with the NRM’s as possible. It is also pro-development, however, albeit a development based on the rural world and predicated on a return to tradition.

With a king, a parliament, a government, an administrative structure, buildings, representatives deep in the country and abroad, symbols and an ideology, the kingdom has by and large acquired or recovered most of the political institutions which characterise states, short of the recognition of its sovereignty by others. The only missing element is an army. Although Museveni has looked away from the consolidation of the kingdom’s institutions, he would clearly not put up with its militarisation. Mengo is well aware of this. The katikkiro’s answer has been to invite Baganda youth to join the national armed forces in order to ‘protect the kingdom’s cultural sites’, under the assumption that the ‘fall of Buganda [in 1967] could be attributed to Baganda’s absence from the security forces’ (M 16.7.1998). Although far from empowering Buganda with its own security apparatus, this approach is intended to shield the kingdom from aggression by the national armed forces, to instil a positive bias among the military, and possibly to create a Buganda faction in the army, just as the Rwandan Patriotic Front began its existence as a segment of the Ugandan armed forces. It is unclear, however, whether the katikkiro’s appeal was heeded at a time when joining the military implies a great likelihood of seeing combat in the Democratic Republic of Congo or against rebels in the northern and western regions.
Financing Buganda: rents, profits and extraction

Despite the kingdom’s considerable success with institutional development, Buganda royalists are well aware that a state does not exist which cannot provide for itself by extracting income from the territory and populations it wishes to control. Yet the 1995 constitution prohibits traditional chiefs from taxing or otherwise forcing contributions from their subjects. Mengo has, however, shown remarkable inventiveness in bypassing this fiscal constraint.

Ebyaffe had provided for some limited sources of income for the kingdom, as several of the properties returned to Buganda remained occupied by government agencies that became tenants. The first Buganda budget, for fiscal year 1994/95, relied almost entirely on such rental income. Of total expected revenues of 1.3 bn Ugandan shillings (USh) (c.$867,000), 934 m were accounted for by the rent of buildings, 205 m by rent from tenants on land owned by the kabaka, and 147 m by rental income from markets also owned by the kabaka in and out of Kampala (NV 15.11.1994). Actual revenues ended up short of this, however, as the government accumulated substantial arrears on its rental payments (Buganda Treasury 1998).

The kingdom had hoped that the 1995 constitution would adopt federalism and that Buganda would thereby capture the fiscal powers of districts as well as their allocations from the national budget. Federalism did not materialise, however, and Mengo was left scurrying for additional sources of income. Land appeared as the solution. Since the 1900 Agreement by which Buganda became a British protectorate, land has played a crucial role in the production and reproduction of the kingdom’s elite. The Agreement replaced communal land rights with a rather heterogeneous system by which some 9,000 square miles were earmarked as British crown lands, another 8,000 square miles (known as mailo land) were given to about 3,700 local chiefs and royals, and 350 square miles became the private property of the kabaka himself, out of a total area of Buganda estimated by the British at 19,600 square miles. This system turned the politically dominant class of chiefs and clan heads into an economically dominant class of landlords who became able to charge rent to previously customary tenants (Mamdani 1976; Muhereza 1992). Although later colonial policies and peasant discontent eventually curtailed this economic domination, it crystallised the previously fluid status of chiefs and introduced class divisions in Buganda (Karlstrom 1999). At independence, the British crown lands were transferred to the kingdom.

The 1967 constitution which abolished the kingdoms also led to the
loss of the crown lands, although *mailo* land, being essentially a freehold tenure, remained in the hands of the chiefs or of those who had purchased it.\(^8\) Idi Amin's nationalisation of land in 1975 was never implemented and Uganda's multiple systems of land tenure (customary, freehold, *mailo* and leasehold) endured. In 1993, *ebyaaffe* witnessed the return of the *kabaka*'s own 350 square miles but not of the crown lands, presumably on the grounds that the kingdom was merely cultural and that the central government was now the successor state to the British administration in Buganda. As the NRM embarked on a land reform in 1998, Mengo began lobbying for a formal acknowledgement of its ownership of these 9,000 square miles in the hope that rental income from tenants and the possible development of plantations would compensate for its lack of fiscal powers.\(^7\) But the government's objectives clashed with those of the kingdom. For the NRM, the Land Bill was meant above all to protect landless peasants from evictions and from excessive rent payments. Over the years, large portions of land had indeed become occupied by tenants and 'squatters' farming the land without formal agreements with the landlords. The NRM wanted to recognise these occupations as customary ownership and provide rights to the farmers. It was also convenient that such recognition would weaken Mengo's leadership. In fact, the legal recognition of customary rights to land by long-term tenants and squatters, and the USh. 1,000 ceiling ($0.70) on annual ground rent that the government wished to impose, affected Buganda in two respects. First, crown land could not be economically profitable under these conditions. Second, the owners of *mailo* land would see the effectiveness of their title and their income diminished, weakening their role as the local representatives of the kingdom and their domination over commoners.

Given the antagonistic positions of the NRM and Mengo, it came as no surprise that the battle of the land bill was acrimonious and plagued by misinformation on both sides. Mengo stressed that the government wanted to steal 9,000 square miles of land 'owned by the Baganda' (*M 27.4.1998*), and not a few public figures close to Bulange argued that Museveni wanted to give Buganda land to Bahima settlers from his own Ankole region (*M 7.5.1998*). The NRM, on the other hand, warned non-Baganda that the kingdom would evict them from their land if their demands were satisfied, and Museveni himself threatened civil war if Mengo were to resist the land reform, accusing the kingdom of confusion, myopia, oligarchic interests and political interference (*M 19.5.1998, 2.6.1998*). Government security forces also rounded up and interrogated Mengo journalists on several occasions.

In the end, the Land Act, as adopted in July 1998, limited the
legalisation of customary ownership to former public land and vested responsibility for the allocation of land ‘not owned by any person or authority’ in the District Land Boards, while keeping rent to landlords at a nominal USh 1,000 a year irrespective of the size of the plot (Government of Uganda 1998). As a result, Mengo was unable to become a full-fledged rentier state. In fact, rental income from markets and land has grown very little since 1997, while rents charged on buildings have diminished as the kingdom repossessed most of the buildings once occupied by government agencies (the Supreme Court and the Treasurer’s house are the only remaining properties for which Buganda collects rents). Overall rental income has fallen from almost 100 per cent of Buganda’s revenues in the 1994/95 fiscal year to 26 per cent in 1999/2000 (Buganda Treasury 1999).

Unable to become a landlord-state, Buganda has tried to become a corporate kingdom. In 1995, it set up the Buganda Investments and Commercial Undertakings Limited (BICUL), a trust company majority-owned by the katikkiro and which itself owns a majority of shares in several companies set up to finance the kingdom (Buganda Treasury 1999). These companies include the Central Broadcasting Services (CBS), a commercial FM-radio station; Central Technical Services (CTS), a public-works company; Njuba Times, a newspaper; and the Royal Travel and Heritage Bureau, a travel agency. These companies have struggled, however, and only CBS has so far brought in any significant revenue. CBS has returned dividends to the kingdom as a shareholder and has paid rent for its Bulange studios. In 1998/99, these two items amounted to as much as 12.4 per cent of all revenues. CTS did fine for a while, winning several government contracts for the construction of dirt roads, but has recently performed poorly. The other two companies appear dormant. Buganda also engages in miscellaneous other entrepreneurial activities, such as party rentals and commercialising coffee seedlings, with mixed success.

Most interesting, however, has been Mengo’s increased reliance on popular mobilisation and donations. Baganda volunteer for their kingdom with unusual alacrity. They make substantial donations of their time and money and can easily be mobilised for large projects, even those who were not born before the abolition of the kingdom in 1967. The 1993 coronation and the 1999 royal wedding were cases in point. Some 2,000 people came to Mengo during the last weeks of July 1993 for a clean-up in anticipation of the coronation. Each of Buganda’s fifty-two clans was represented (WT 23.7.1993). As the Weekly Topic (30.7.1993) put it then, ‘the spirit of the people is simply
amazing. They come together to work voluntarily; only the love of ebyaffe draws them to unite for a common cause.' In part, this capacity for mobilisation derives from the perceived legitimacy of the kingdom by most Baganda and from the popularity of the king whose return was seen as a new ferment of social cohesion after twenty-five years of chaos. ‘One woman Ida Nakazzi with sweat running down her face said, although it is harvesting time, the crops could wait even if it were for a year stressing that … the king is so nice’ (WT 23.7.1993). There is also a considerable amount of social pressure for participation, however, particularly from clan elders.

For the 1999 wedding of the kabaka, the emphasis was on financial donations. Contributions came from Baganda and non-Baganda, including politicians, Indian businessmen, and corporations like Coca-Cola. CBS read the names of donors on the air, creating competition in displays of royalism. Altogether, voluntary contributions to the wedding amounted to USh1.1 bn (US$738,000) (NV 31.8.1999). The kingdom, whose origins were tributary, wishes to encourage the formation of an obligation of gift-giving. In a 1996 speech, for example, the kabaka reminded his subjects that ‘Baganda derived great pride and satisfaction in the payment of taxes in the past … Let us rediscover that pride and use it to rebuild Buganda and Uganda’ (www.buganda.com/mutebi.htm). In 1993, a census project hoped to find ‘a way of soliciting donations from willing Baganda’ (NV 15.10.1993), but was apparently not carried out. The same year, a member of the royal family suggested that clan elders should collect at least Sh100 from every Muganda for the kingdom (WT 12.11.1993). The kabaka’s wedding gave momentum to these efforts. Donations and suggested investments became the largest source of revenue (65 per cent) in the kingdom’s 2000 budget. Districts and sub-counties are expected to ‘pledge a monthly contribution to the Treasury’ (Buganda Treasury 1999), while each clan is allocated a week per year to make a present-loaded courtesy call to the kabaka. Each clan member is also expected to buy a share (worth USh10,000) in Buganda Investments Ltd (BIL), a company created in 1999 with projected activities in trade and real estate. Clans must also register all their members and each member pay USh3,500 ‘to get an identity’ (Buganda Treasury 1999). Finally, Baganda are strongly encouraged to buy certificates (from USh3,000 to USh1 m) in order to fund the recurrent expenditures of the kingdom. The text of the budget conveys the quasi-tax nature of these certificates: ‘Baganda and supporters of the Kingdom will make a voluntary yearly contribution towards this fund according to one’s financial ability or
capacity’ (Buganda Treasury 1999). The restoration of *saza* chiefs, who are responsible for the distribution of certificates in rural areas, is better understood in this perspective as an instrument of resource extraction from local populations. Hence, the assessment by Buddu County *Saza* Chief Frederick Mulindwa (interview, 2000) that ‘I am first and foremost a fund-raiser.’ All these ‘voluntary contributions’ added up to $1,256,667 in the 1999/2000 budget.

*If it acts like a state … : Buganda policies*

In addition to restoring its institutions and raising funds, Buganda has also progressively developed its capacity to make and implement policy. So far, however, most of Buganda’s policies have been geared at nurturing the growth of the kingdom and promoting its ideology. Development policies, on the other hand, have only received secondary emphasis despite their central position in the kingdom’s discourse. Mengo allocates indeed most of its resources to its own functioning (being rather like most African states in this respect). In fact, apart from the financing of the operations of the Buganda Cultural and Development Foundation (BUCADEF), the entire budget is dedicated to the administrative expenses of Bulange and the ministries. Furthermore, finance, land and the rehabilitation of the kingdom (i.e. the restoration of the king’s numerous palaces) account for the bulk of ministerial expenses, as against minimal allocations to agriculture, planning or community development. Compared with the 43 per cent of expenditure allocated to the *kabaka*'s office in 1998/99, the absence of spending on planning and economic development that year makes the justification of the kingdom as an instrument of Buganda development sound hollow (Buganda Treasury 1999).

To the kingdom’s credit, however, most of its development activities are managed by BUCADEF and funded by external grants, which are not included in the budget. BUCADEF was established in 1995 as an NGO for the implementation of the kingdom’s development projects. It has since been relatively successful in competing for funds. In 1998, it received a USh518.9 m grant from the United States Agency for International Development for a two-year food security project which was renewed in 2000. BUCADEF is also the lead NGO forMpigi district for a USh663 m World Bank-financed Nutrition and Early Childhood Development Project (interview, Nusoke, 2000). Additional programmes sponsored by foreign donors include a hygiene, water and
sanitation project and a sustainable agriculture project. BUCADEF has a staff of about two dozen.

The Kabaka Foundation constitutes another ‘parastatal’ development agency. It is a charitable trust registered as an NGO and aims to ‘institute, promote, encourage and support cultural, educational, literacy, economic, social and charitable projects for the benefits of the public in Buganda and Uganda’ (Kabaka Foundation 1999). The Foundation’s beginnings have been timid, however, and have suffered from the closure of Greenland Bank where it held its accounts. Although these funds have now been recovered, the Foundation still ran only three projects as of end-2000, the latter two of which were still at the planning stages: the Bukalango Model Village Programme near Kakiri, some 20 kilometres outside Kampala; the Street Children Centre, an orphanage in Kampala’s southern suburbs; and ‘Heritage Trails’, a project for the development of community tourism begun in 1999 in association with a Ugandan NGO, Uganda Community Tourism Association (UCOTA), and a British NGO, Action for Conservation through Tourism (ACT). Although the model village’s 3 acre farm successfully produces matoke (bananas), coffee, groundnuts and vegetables, it has attracted only limited interest from local farmers who seem to have expected inflows of cash from the kabaka for their village and may have been disappointed to be taught instead methods of self-reliance. People have attended in large numbers at the occasion of the kabaka’s visits but this has not translated into mobilisation for farming. The purpose of the ‘Heritage Trails’ project is to ‘assist communities to develop and manage tourism themselves in order to generate income’ (ACT’s Press Release, undated), but its existence sheds another light upon Buganda’s development policies. Indeed, its interest in this project may not lie so much in generating income for local communities as in bringing back to life important cultural sites of Ganda culture (restored under the project to serve as tourist attractions), thereby generating cultural awareness and promoting ideological unification among Baganda, while sending the signal to remote villages that the kingdom is back.

This is not the only area of the kingdom’s developmental action that also serves to produce ideology. As early as 1996, the kingdom embarked on a ‘Cultural and Development Revolution’ (CDR) (www.buganda.com/buga5yr.html). While its first official objectives were to improve local incomes, health and education, it also vowed to ‘protect the Buganda heritage, to educate the Baganda in matters of their culture and values and to develop the Luganda language’. 
According to its launching document, the causes of Africa’s development crisis proceed from ‘the abandonment by Africa of its traditions and political cultures, the advent of the European civilisation, and the adoption wholesale of foreign practices vulnerable to corruption and authoritarian rule’ (ibid.). Subsequent endeavours, such as BUCADEF’s 1996 ‘New African Village by the Year 2000 Programme’ and the kingdom’s 2000–05 plan, have a similar mix of developmental discourse and promotion of rural lifestyles around traditional local political structures (www.buganda.com/nav.2000.html).

With hindsight, policy-making is the parent pauvre of Buganda’s experiment with restored statehood. To be fair, the re-creation of institutions and the financing of the kingdom’s operations take a logical precedence over its developmental work. Nevertheless, it is as yet unclear from Buganda’s actions whether the restoration of the kingdom is to serve the purpose of local development, or whether the kingdom’s developmental discourse is to serve the purpose of its restoration, its culture and its ideology of the rural state. At any rate, Buganda is a complex and entrepreneurial operation, a quasi-state functioning well beyond the letter and the spirit of the 1995 constitution.

THE LIMITS OF BUGANDA’S REVIVAL

Despite its successes, the Buganda experiment also reveals the fragilities of traditional resurgence in Africa. First, affection for its institutions may not alone provide a sufficient foundation for its sustained rebirth. In several ways, indeed, while ordinary rural Baganda display substantial affection for the king and the idea of the kingdom, they nevertheless remain aloof from its political projects and display a relatively strong allegiance to the national state. The kingdom therefore faces a particular challenge in translating its capacity for symbolic mobilisation into political and developmental mobilisation. This obstacle is quite significant to the extent that it may reveal a compartmentalisation of allegiance – with the kingdom confined to the cultural realm in the minds of its very subjects – which would all but preclude a political future for Mengo. Its future success in democratising its structures and delivering services to its population may turn out to be a crucial factor in determining its capacity to maintain the momentum of its reconstruction.

Second, relations between Mengo and the NRM highlight the extent to which competing notions of sovereignty may represent an obstacle
for policies of incorporation of traditional structures into post-colonial ones. Because the government does not recognise any political sovereignty to the kingdom, and because the latter’s current leadership is unwilling to consider integration to the state without a recognition of its historical sovereignty, the constitutional incorporation of Buganda into a mixed system of government remains a distant possibility.

**Allegiance and collective action**

The first question facing Mengo concerns its ability to maintain the momentum of its reconstruction and to mobilise Baganda for development, given the relatively narrow interests it currently represents and its tendency to extract more from its subjects than it offers them in return. Buganda cannot indeed be understood as a politically homogeneous and sociologically monolithic structure facing the central state with a unified agenda, and Mengo cannot be perceived as automatically representing the wishes of a majority of Baganda. Buganda’s restoration as a kingdom has historically been the objective of a particular sub-group of Baganda, namely the surviving entourage of King Muteesa II, clan heads, mailo landowners, commercial farmers and other rural elites, all groups whose social and economic status suffered from the abolition of kingdoms in 1967 and from the subsequent alterations in land rights which prevented their reproduction as an elite (see Karlstrom 1999: 150–95). While ordinary Baganda would probably recognise the authority of these elites in their ‘traditional’ spheres of influence, they are not automatically supportive of their larger political ambitions. Specifically, rural commoners, who suffered considerably under the Amin, Obote and Okello regimes, may be unwilling to threaten the peace and relative welfare that they have reached under the NRM for issues such as federalism. Many among them may also perceive the un-elected lukiiko as a self-serving structure, more intent on reproducing the domination of Buganda’s traditional oligarchy than on representing the interests of the king’s subjects. Mengo’s battle for land reform in 1998, which appeared aimed at restoring the assets of its elites more than at benefiting small farmers, probably contributed to such popular sentiments. Younger Ganda elites and urban educated groups, whether in the corporate business class or civil service, also have somewhat divergent interests from the Mengo monarchists. Although the kingdom’s restoration has provided them with new political and economic entrepreneurial opportunities, they may not be willing to pursue these at the cost of antagonising the
state on which they depend for maintaining a favourable business climate or for employment. In short, Mengo’s political objectives beyond cultural restoration are not necessarily those of a majority of Baganda.

In addition to this relative lack of political representation, Mengo has not so far provided Baganda with sufficient public goods and services to induce their instrumental allegiance either. As yet, the economic actions of the kingdom have contributed little to local development, privileging instead its own institutional reconstruction, while exacting a relatively high quasi-fiscal burden from its subjects. Furthermore, whereas Mengo uses its traditional structures, such as *amasaza* chiefs, to extract local resources, it strangely adopts the forms of the post-colonial state when delivering development projects. BUCADEF projects, for example, are administered by districts instead of by traditional counties, and BUCADEF offices are located in provincial capitals. Adding to the possible confusion already engendered by its foreign-funded NGO status, which associates it to ‘outside’ agencies, rural Baganda may well identify their kingdom more for its extraction of their scarce resources than for its contribution to their welfare, and the kingdom may well reproduce among its subjects, despite its best intentions, the alienation that often characterises relations between locals and the development industry (Uvin 1998).

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Museveni easily captured a majority of the votes in all Buganda districts except Kampala in the 2001 presidential elections, despite Mengo’s implicit support for his main rival, Kizza Besigye. Similarly, Bratton & Lambright (2001) report that only 24 per cent of Baganda support a return to traditional rule (though this is still more than the 16 per cent figure for all Ugandans). The lack of success to date of the Kabaka Foundation’s projects and the weak levels of mobilisation in support of the kingdom’s development endeavours also illustrate the lukewarm attitude of Ganda subjects with respect to Mengo’s policies. This relative political apathy undermines claims that Africans privilege affection over rationality in their economic and political choices, supporting instead a view of Baganda subjects as relatively rational actors (see Hyden 1981; Bates & Curry 1992). If the affective support that the kingdom receives from its subjects is to be transformed into sustainable political allegiance, Mengo will probably have to offer Baganda more than the psychological benefits of cultural identification and disalienation from post-colonial political structures.

Even if it were to do so, however, there is no guarantee that Mengo
could command sustained political support. Indeed, the contradiction between the kingdom’s capacity for cultural mobilisation and its weak record of developmental mobilisation, not only tapers any excessive enthusiasm for the notion that traditional institutions may benefit from a comparative advantage in organising collective action, but also suggests that there may be two logics to Buganda’s attitude towards their kingdom. Long alienated from a state that often turned against them, they may appreciate the cultural value of their kingdom and derive a certain pride from its history and resurgence, which translates into a desire for symbolic and cultural mobilisation. Satisfied, however, with the developmental and peace efforts of the NRM, and relatively inundated by development projects due to Uganda’s popularity with donors, they may not feel the need to translate their cultural allegiance into political or economic mobilisation. If correct, this observation would affect the political viability of the kingdom, irrespective of its capacity to democratise.

**Incorporation and competing claims to sovereignty**

Buganda’s most fundamental problem lies with Mengo’s desire for formal incorporation into the Ugandan state. Since the NRM took over, Mengo’s objective has been the creation of a federal system with Buganda as a member state, a policy Baganda refer to as *fedoro* (see *DT* 25.1.1994). It campaigned vigorously for federalism in the 1994 elections to the Constituent Assembly and in the negotiations leading to the 1995 constitution. Its political project has so far remained no more than a project, however. Not surprisingly, its implementation has been prevented by the NRM, which does not wish to encourage alternative sources of power. More surprisingly, however, the ideology of the current conservative royalist Mengo leadership and its conception of Buganda as a historically sovereign entity have also so far prevented the realisation of a formally incorporated mixed polity in Buganda.

The most obvious obstacle to Mengo’s ambition is that the NRM’s political project does not include the allocation of political responsibilities to traditional systems. President Museveni is opposed to ethnic-based federalism and to granting traditional institutions any significant political role. If he allowed the resurgence of Buganda, it is in part because Buganda has the potential to be an adjunct to the state and, like any other African government, the NRM is eager to share the burden of service provision and development efforts (Semboja &
Therkildsen 1995; *SV* 1.8.1993). More importantly, however, the NRM tolerates Buganda because it has needed its electoral support. By and large, the restoration of the kingdom took place in exchange for the Buganda vote in the 1994 elections for the Constituent Assembly (Doornbos & Mwesigye 1994; Mukyala-Makiika 1998; Oloka-Onyango 1997). In essence, *ebujje* deflected the demands for multi-partyism (Doornbos 1993: 128). Between the challenges of multi-party politics and traditional rulers, Museveni chose the lesser of two evils. But the NRM did not intend to integrate Buganda into the structures of sovereignty. Hence, it opposed federalism and, later, the redistribution of ‘crown lands’ to Buganda, as it has opposed any measure that would give it political clout and the capacity to become an independent political force.

Instead of interacting with Buganda elites as colleagues in government, the NRM has treated the kingdom with a mix of co-option and intimidation, the usual tools with which African regimes deal with competing loci of power. Museveni has systematically recruited members of the Buganda elite in his governments (see Karlstrom 1999: 208–10) and has successfully divided Baganda politicians at crucial junctures, such as during the debates of the Constituent Assembly on federalism in 1994 and 1995, when some members of the ‘Buganda Caucus’ (including Chief Prince Besmeri Mulondo) came out in favour of the government’s decentralisation scheme, in defiance of their mandate from Mengo (*M* 16.9.1994; *NV* 25.1.1995; *SV* 7.5.1995; Oloka-Onyango 1997: 183). The Caucus, composed of less traditional Ganda elites than the core Mengo leadership, even rejected a *lukiiko* resolution that Buganda districts make a mandatory contribution of 10 per cent of their annual revenue to Mengo (*NV* 21.3.1995). Museveni also used repression, sending police to cancel pro-federal rallies and Mengo-sponsored ‘seminars’ on federalism, and pushing along with a policy of instilling fears of Buganda’s hegemonic ambitions among the rest of the population.

While the NRM’s opposition to federalism does not surprise, the kingdom’s refusal to capitalise on alternative options offered by the constitution, which would have resulted in some degree of incorporation, is less intuitively obvious. Buganda received a concession in Article 178 of the constitution, which stipulates that districts, the local units of Uganda’s decentralised system, are free to cooperate and to set up, by charter, a council which can be granted certain legislative powers (though not that of taxation), adding that ‘the districts of Buganda … shall be deemed to have agreed to cooperate’. Although
the kingdom’s local structure is articulated around eighteen saza counties, Buganda overlaps indeed with nine Ugandan districts, whose leadership is locally elected. What the constitution offered the kingdom, by and large, was the assumption that the districts located in Buganda territory had come together to recognise the authority of Mengo to represent them in certain matters. This provision has remained dead letter, however, as the conservative faction in control of the lukiko rejected the idea that Buganda’s existence could be derived from the actions of government-created districts, on the grounds that Buganda historically predates them and politically transcends them. For these royalists, the charter option would have displaced the centre of agency from Mengo to the districts, empowering state structures over the kingdom, a dependence they found unacceptable. Even less acceptable was the possibility that districts could later secede from the kingdom by opting out from the charter. This fear of secession proceeds in part from the large numbers of non-Baganda (or half-Baganda) living in Buganda districts and the perceived danger that they may one day form a majority in some of them. The current Mengo leadership sees the unity of Buganda as organic, and its ideology cannot accommodate such a challenge. As a royalist insider put it to me, ‘[when] you have a family, you do not need an agreement’ as to how it should interact.

There appears, however, to be a class and generational gap on this issue. Behind the rejection of the charter were the lukiko royalists, clan heads and rural landowning elites who adopted a ‘more-primordialist-than-thou’ attitude in the constitutional debate in pursuit of their federalist objectives (Karlstrom, pers. com. 11.5.2001). Buganda’s most educated elite and its civil servants were more favourable to the charter option, which would have better allowed them to continue straddling positions in both systems. So were younger Mengo officials for whom the purity of Buganda’s rebirth matters less than the opportunities it may provide them as political entrepreneurs. The lukiko radicals narrowly defeated the more moderate factions on the charter issue and marginalised these factions in Mengo’s power structure, leading some of the moderate leadership, such as current Prime Minister Apolo Nsibambi (interview, 1999), to seek better political fortunes with the national government.

It is this very refusal, by Mengo’s ultra-royalist core, to integrate the state as anything but a sovereign entity, which has presided over the unilateral rebuilding of the kingdom after 1995 and, increasingly so, after 1998. Apart from the formation of a government and attempts to collect rent from the NRM, Mengo’s rebirth had been limited until
1995. After federalism was defeated, the process of reconstruction accelerated as the kingdom boosted its fiscal independence, strengthened its local and international presence, increased mobilisation and propaganda, and promoted its own development policies. This reconstruction is essentially a strategy of relative disengagement from the state whose purpose is to become more autonomous, develop a record of public administration, and improve its bargaining position for a hypothetical new round of constitutional negotiations in the post-Museveni future. There is an apparent consensus among Mengo’s elite that the ‘movement system’ of government is unlikely to survive beyond the Museveni presidency, and that the country will then negotiate a new political dispensation. When this time comes, the monarchists want to be ready to make a credible claim for autonomous local self-government in a federal system. In Mengo’s view, this requires the re-establishment of an effective presence on the ground and the development of institutional strength. This is another reason for its rejection of Article 178 of the constitution. For most people in Bulange, accepting the charter would have weakened the future pursuit of federalism. As an anonymous member of the kabaka’s entourage put it to me, the state may once again need Mengo’s support in the future and, hence, be more accommodating to its demands:

We must be ready for the time we get federal status. Now we are doing our journey on foot. If we hope to get access to a vehicle, we must first get close to it, although we will not embark. We walk along the same route. We don’t take shortcuts. People with vehicles have not invited us to take a ride. They see us sweating when they pass us by. But patience will be rewarded. We walk the same route everyday until, one day, they want to give a lift to someone and we will be there.

These expectations have also involved a disengagement of Mengo from the electoral process. Despite the occasional declarations of some royalists, the kingdom itself has refrained from officially endorsing any position or candidate in either the 2000 referendum on multi-partyism or in the 2001 presidential elections, though its preference for abstention in the first instance, and for Kizza Besigye in the second, was well known. For now, the costs of waiting for federalism are minimised by the kingdom’s apparent increased ability to raise funds elsewhere and by the ongoing informal collaboration between Buganda district chairmen and Mengo.

In the end, Buganda’s reconstruction and apparent disengagement from the state have to be understood in the context of its claims to relative sovereignty. Mengo’s ultimate goal is to engage with the state
by becoming part of it, but only if it can preserve its political identity in the process. It conceives its participation in the political system as implying a reform of the state, in the form of federalism. The NRM, on the other hand, is willing to accept Mengo’s participation contingent upon its metamorphosis into an expression of the state’s decentralised district structures, rather than as a kingdom per se. What is at stake is sovereignty. Competing claims to sovereignty account both for the extent of Buganda’s revival and for the failure of its incorporation into the Ugandan political system.

Despite its limitations, Buganda provides a unique example of the reformation of a pre-colonial state within the confines of post-colonial statehood. In a continent where decentralisation is being promoted with an increasing sense of urgency by local governments and donors alike, and traditional institutions are perceived by many, themselves included, as natural participants in decentralisation exercises (World Bank 1995: 64; van Rouvery Van Nieuwaal 1999; Wunsch 2000), Mengo is staking a credible claim to eventual limited self-rule. In doing so, it is following and further contributing to a trend that is developing across the continent, despite the ambivalence of the legacy of customary institutions (Mamdani 1996; West & Kloeck-Jenson 1999).

Yet, Buganda’s experiment also highlights some of the contradictions associated with the incorporation of traditional systems in African governments, such as their own lack of social and political homogeneity, the burden that their need for resources may represent for their populations, the difficulties in translating cultural affinities into political and developmental mobilisation, and the challenges in negotiating competing claims to sovereignty with the post-colonial state. These contradictions militate against an excessively optimistic view of the capacity of indigenous institutions to translate their historical legitimacy into political currency and highlight potential hurdles for the long-term incorporation of resurgent traditional structures into contemporary African political systems. Yet, Buganda’s difficulties need not imply that traditional polities are irrelevant to the reconfiguration of Africa’s power. The kingdom does after all exert effective – albeit informal – power at the local level, and contributes to the existence of a dual structure of authority. The Buganda experiment suggests, however, that it behoves traditional institutions to make the case for their revival through developmental policies, democratic
practices and adaptive structures, rather than by merely calling upon the past for allegiance. If they can do this, they could make a plausible claim for a comparative advantage in governance over the post-colonial state, and force the latter to alter its foundations in order to accommodate them.

NOTES

1. In this paper, tradition is not meant to imply a lack of modernity but refers to institutions that display some level of cultural endogeneity in comparison to the post-colonial state. Whether traditions are real, invented or imagined is irrelevant here as long as they stand in contrast to the imposed institution of post-colonial statehood. See Ranger 1983, 1993; van Dijk & van Rouvery van Nieuwaal 1999.

2. Ebyaffe includes the Lubiri palace, the Bulange administrative building, a court building, the king’s 350 square miles of land, another 10 square miles of land belonging to the royal family, the king’s lake, the residences of the treasurer and chief justice, the land adjacent to Lubiri with three residences, and other residential and office buildings (NV 7 May 1993).

3. The coronation episode is well documented in Bertrand (1997) and in the relevant issues of The Monitor and The New Vision. Karlstrom (1999) provides an excellent discussion of the politics leading to ebyaffe.

4. Throughout this paper, I use an exchange rate of $1:USh1,500 which about averages the rate for the 1999–2000 period.

5. For a complete text of the ‘Uganda Agreement of 1900’, see www.buganda.com/buga1900.htm. The term mailo derives from ‘the square mile unit of measurement used in the allocation of this land’ (Marquardt & Sebina-Zziwa 1998: 184).

6. According to Karlstrom (1999), the number of holdings had increased from 3,700 to some 10,000 by the end of the colonial period.

7. The 1900 agreement does not specify the location of this land, limiting the description to ‘10,000 square miles of waste or cultivated, or uncultivated land, or land occupied without prior gift of the Kabaka or chiefs by … strangers’ and specifying that ‘the revenue derived from such lands shall form part of the general revenue of the Uganda Protectorate’ (www.buganda.com/buga1900.htm:7)

8. Bear in mind that most Bulange workers are volunteers and the value of their contributions is not included in the budget.

9. Buyers of these certificates have their names read on CBS radio. The day after I bought one in July 2000, CBS repeatedly broadcast my name and called upon Baganda not to be outdone by a Muzungu (white person) in their generosity to the kingdom.

10. These figures refer to expected revenue, not actual income, and may well be over-ambitious. At the time of finalising this paper, the kingdom’s consolidated figures for fiscal year 1999–2000 were not yet available.

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