Journal of African History, **46** (2005), pp. 321–5. © 2005 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0021853704009958 Printed in the United Kingdom

REVIEW ARTICLE

NATIONHOOD, POWER AND HISTORY: UNFINISHED BUSINESS AND THE *LONGUE DURÉE* IN UGANDA

BY RICHARD REID
University of Durham

Governing Uganda: British Colonial Rule and its Legacy. By By GARDNER THOMPSON. Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2003. Pp. x + 366. £22.95, paperback (ISBN 9970-02-394-2).

Landed Obligation: The Practice of Power in Buganda. By By HOLLY ELISABETH HANSON. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 2003. Pp. xxii + 264. No price given (ISBN 0-325-07037-7); $26.95, paperback (ISBN 0-325-07036-9).

KEY WORDS: Uganda, colonial, precolonial, historiography, nation-states, political.

THE appearance of these two books marks the continuation of what has been a veritable resurgence of interest in Ugandan history in the last decade or so, facilitated in part by the relative stability provided by Yoweri Museveni's presidency. The renaissance dates to the early and mid-1990s: while scholars of a more senior generation published work which seemed to encapsulate several decades' thinking on the region – Christopher Wrigley and Jean-Pierre Chrétien foremost among them[1] – a new generation turned its attention to Uganda in a manner that had not been possible since the 1960s. A number of doctoral theses produced by European and North American scholars during the 1990s have progressed into monograph form or given rise to flurries of articles.[2] Holly Hanson's book is part of that wave; Gardner Thompson's research was undertaken a little earlier, but the Ph.D. thesis that forms the basis of his book was completed at the beginning of the 1990s. While not all of this work has been concerned with Buganda, it is clear that the kingdom continues to loom large in the scholarly imagination. The centrality of Buganda in Ugandan history is a theme which has linked together much of the work of the last decade, in terms of the nature of the precolonial kingdom, its relationship with the British and its role in the protectorate, and later independent nation, of Uganda. Other critical issues have been raised, too, such as the need to revisit both the precolonial and the colonial pasts, and discontinuity, in terms of understanding the degree to which the colonial 'moment' was as disruptive as it was transitory.

Uganda has long been a showcase of pioneering scholarship in the field of African studies; models have been designed and tested in the Ugandan laboratory, of the ancient economic environment, of political power and state-formation, of the nature and impact of colonial rule and of the divisions inherent in the decolonized

[1] C. C. Wrigley, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty* (Cambridge, 1996); J.-P. Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of History* (New York, 2003; French original, 2000).

[2] In addition to the two authors under review here, a selection of 'Ugandan' theses would include Doyle (Cambridge, 1998), Engdahl (Uppsala, 1999), Karlstrom (Chicago, 1999), Medard (Paris, 2001) and Reid (London, 1996).

polity. This pioneering trend dates to the halcyon days of Makerere University and the East African Institute of Social Research (later Makerere Institute of Social Research) in the 1950s and early 1960s, when some of the most important historical, anthropological and ethno-historical research was undertaken. This was followed by the hiatus of the Obote-Amin-Obote era, when history, like many other disciplines, became a matter of life and death. In recent years a great deal of the literature on Uganda has reflected very contemporary concerns – notably the series of volumes edited by Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle[3] – underlining the degree to which Museveni's state has become a showcase of so many of Africa's current 'issues', from internal conflict to attempts at political plurality, from the impact of the free market to the struggle against AIDS. This is understandable, and welcome; yet history too has made its return, and while still a serious business, it has been pursued in a relatively more secure environment. After battle comes an eerie quiet; if the Ugandan twentieth century has been one of often deafening clamour, then it seems that the past few years have afforded an opportunity for some calmer reflection.

Both Thompson and Hanson demonstrate the importance of historicization in depth, even if, as seems to be partly the case with Thompson, this is an unconscious endeavour. Hanson is concerned with the exercise of power in the precolonial kingdom of Buganda, and then with how structures of power were altered in the transition to British colonial rule. Thompson is also interested in power and governance, and is ostensibly concerned with the colonial period in its entirety, although his main narrative focus is on the period of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. Again particular attention is paid to Buganda. Both books have an eye on modern Uganda, and seek to shed light on current political discourses and relationships. They are very different in substance and approach: Thompson adopts a no-thrills, workmanlike approach to his subject, whereas Hanson's writing is often abstract, while at the same time managing to be involved and earnest. They complement each other thematically, if not in the specifics of their arguments. Hanson, attempting to reconstruct the delicate balances of power (which she characterizes as 'reciprocal obligation') that held the precolonial kingdom together, suggests that the arrival of the British buckled and distorted these relationships, and opened disputes around land and authority that last to the present day. Thompson argues that the colonial state was distant and largely impotent, that Uganda has always been 'difficult' to govern and that Museveni is today facing some of the same problems confronted by the British in the 1940s and 1950s. Both are ultimately concerned with Buganda, 'good governance' and the *longue durée*.

Both authors, in their different ways, oscillate between exaggerating and ignoring certain aspects of the reality of *power*, with the purpose of proving their particular theses. But each introduces important ideas, and makes a real contribution to debates that one hopes will continue. A key theme in both books is the link among *pasts*, namely the precolonial, the colonial and the postcolonial, three historic 'zones' which were once treated as distinct blocs. The belief in such rigid temporal integrity is fading; the *longue durée* approach, it would seem, has much to offer.[4] Jean-Pierre Chrétien has recently pointed younger historians in

[3] To name but a few, for example: *Changing Uganda* (Oxford, 1991), *From Chaos to Order* (Oxford, 1995) and *Developing Uganda* (Oxford, 1998).

[4] I use the term *longue durée* in its Braudelian sense. In this context, it refers to the resilience of what can be broadly termed 'local conditions', i.e. the persistence of indigenous dynamics, institutions or 'structures' – for example economic systems, or political as well as physical environments – and how these must be understood over the

this direction. His *Great Lakes of Africa* (English translation) is the first serious attempt at a regional history since the *Oxford History of East Africa*, and it should be in use for as long as the latter has been. Chrétien urges historians to 'put contemporary events in a broader perspective, one that includes the long history of mastering the environment, political structuring, and managing contacts with foreigners'.[5] To a large extent Chrétien has in mind the historical roots of the Rwandan genocide; but his observation holds true across the region, and certainly in the attempt to understand the emergence of the state of Uganda in its present form. Judiciously, however, he cautions that 'research on inheritance and continuity, legitimate in all historical reflection, can become a trap if the question of discontinuities … is not raised at every stage'.[6]

The two books under examination here have, in their different ways, sought the broader perspective. It would be woefully premature to herald the return of precolonial history to the mainstream academic fold. And yet it is the precolonial past which is Hanson's major concern, and which haunts Thompson's book. Since the 1970s, precolonial history has been a minority occupation. In Uganda, as elsewhere in Africa, as a field for new research it sank largely without trace. Uganda itself was overcome by strife, while more broadly across the discipline of African history interest in the precolonial past declined, especially as colonial archives opened up and a new scholarly generation was directed toward reinterpretations of the colonial era. Some excellent work has been produced as a result. But the danger, with the neglect of the precolonial, lies in putting too many carts before rather few horses. Hanson is to be commended for attempting to bridge the precolonial and colonial eras, in a nuanced and sophisticated examination of the expression and practice of power in Buganda. Her treatment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, is somewhat incomplete. She offers (Chapter 3) a detailed reconstruction of the mid-eighteenth century, but her alternative to the widely accepted scenario of political consolidation and state-expansion is unconvincing. She argues for a 'dissolution of social order' instead of 'social development and expanding royal power', but the evidence does not seem to exist to support this view, and it is not clear why this period should be seen as 'unstable' in the way she suggests. Moreover, she largely overlooks the first half of the nineteenth century, a period of dramatic social change and political innovation. This means that what comes later in the book – and which in many ways is the central thrust of the thesis, namely an analysis of the last decades of the nineteenth century and first of the twentieth – in part rests on a questionable reconstruction of the middle decades of the eighteenth. Hanson has done first-rate work in other spheres, notably in the interaction between the Ganda and the British over the issue of land; but the porous nature of her precolonial analysis does not necessarily lend itself to a clearer understanding of the colonial or the more recent past. Hanson's approach marks progress, but the potential pitfalls in undertaking precolonial research are still apparent.

In recent years, historians and social and political scientists of various hues have been confronted with the need to think differently – usually in the longer term – in order to explain Africa's 'problems' since independence. The question of whether a 'colonial legacy' can be used to explain most of those problems continues to spur

---

long term. They may 'adapt' over time but they are nonetheless continuous, and the power of the indigenous overcomes the external – i.e. colonial rule – which is transient and ephemeral.

[5] Chrétien, *Great Lakes*, 318.

[6] *Ibid.* 17.

debate. In the past (and still for some today), the answer lay in whether one considered the colonial experience to have been essentially benign or intrinsically malevolent. However, according to Thompson, it is not *merely* a question of the colonial state's benevolence or otherwise, but its ineffectiveness, which should influence our consideration of the colonial legacy, and which sheds new light on the concept of the *longue durée*. Chrétien's warning about the need to search for discontinuities must be heeded; but if particular transitions were not as sharp as was once supposed – from indigenous state to colony, to modern nation-state – then clearly what we are dealing with are complex *interactions* rather than violent arrivals and departures. There is some disagreement between Hanson and Thompson here: Hanson argues, in a rather more subtle thesis than Thompson's, that the British undermined social networks and local bases of socio-political power. The colonial state is depicted as introducing a coercive hierarchy to Buganda; my own view is that this exaggerates the disruptive power of the colonial state, and tends to underplay the violently coercive nature of the precolonial polity itself. It is certainly clear that the British were able to take advantage of extant state structures; but this was indeed a complex alliance, on which, Thompson would argue, the Ganda came to impose themselves, and in which the British in time would become largely impotent partners.

Thompson's basic thesis is that the colonial state in Uganda was weak and ineffectual. It could be read, perhaps, as a new form of imperial apologia: Thompson refers to 'unintended outcomes', in other words, whatever has gone wrong since independence, and *might* have been Britain's fault, was not part of Britain's plan. In any case, the British did not actually have the power to *shape* Uganda's postcolonial history, or indeed much of its colonial history. Thompson seeks to reduce the historical significance of British colonial rule in Uganda; Britain was, in the end, rather impotent. This dimension of Thompson's writing smacks somewhat of the old 'good and bad' balance sheets of colonial rule, and compares unfavourably with the more nuanced studies of the colonial state produced in recent years.[7] Yet Thompson is also driving at a more fundamental idea, albeit one which has been developed by scholars of colonialism over the past twenty years or more: '[h]ow colonial rule affected African society has now to be weighed against *how African society affected colonial rule* [author's italics]' (p. 8). Thompson's book marks a further step in the historiographical *Africanization* of the colonial experience. What were these forces which apparently affected, indeed disrupted, colonial rule so dramatically? On one level, his book is an attempt to understand Uganda today, in that it seeks to compare the challenges of governing Uganda in the 1950s with those in the 1990s. In reality, even if perhaps unintentionally, the subtext is backward-looking, in that the indigenous forces which seem to remake colonialism in their own image need to be understood in deeper historical context. The embodiment of these indigenous forces, it seems, is Buganda itself. Buganda is potent, and divisive; it was the single biggest obstacle to the effective governance of Uganda by the British.

Frequent has been the complaint among non-Ganda Ugandan scholars that when foreigners come to study Uganda, they study Buganda. This is not entirely true; nonetheless the kingdom has as powerful an attraction for the *muzungu* today as it did for Speke. And it is clear that Buganda – and Buganda's relations with its neighbours, a topic not so well studied but which urgently needs to be – is at the

[7] J. Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, 1979), set many standards; more recently, D. M. Anderson, *Eroding the Commons: the Politics of Ecology in Baringo, Kenya, 1890s–1963* (Oxford, 2002), is a good example of the specialized study with wider implications for our understanding of the colonial impact.

centre of much of the debate about the evolution of modern Uganda. In terms of nationhood, we are concerned here with the journeys made by precolonial states into colonial systems of governance, and then into 'modern' nationhood. Buganda was the precolonial nation-state *par excellence*; and indeed in Uganda, one of the fundamental factors behind the unworkability and instability of the modern Ugandan nation-state is the fact that several nation-states had already developed in the area before the British arrived to award the 'stamp of progress' in the form of the protectorate. To look at the reasons for the instability of Uganda in terms of strictly postcolonial and even colonial 'issues' is to begin at the wrong end of history; and to bemoan the failure of Africans to build the 'nation-state' effectively and embrace that paradigm to everyone's satisfaction is to ignore the precolonial past and to misunderstand the roots and the development of political culture in the region.

In this context, both Hanson and Thompson point to the importance of unfinished business, Hanson in terms of dialogues of power during the transition from precolonial to colonial, and their long-term echoes, Thompson with the indigenous imposing itself on the external, and the impact this has on contemporary Uganda. Again both are concerned with Buganda, and the placement of that state in modern Uganda; but more broadly, and probably more importantly, both point to the continuity of precolonial influences and dynamics, even if they disagree about the nature of colonial disruption and change. In assessing the nature of precolonial power in the region, and the balance of power in the colonial era, it is important to recognize that the postcolonial age is one in which old scores remain unsettled, and old battles continue to be fought. Discontinuity must be given its place: Yoweri Museveni is no Andrew Cohen, as Thompson admits; the *kabaka*s of the late nineteenth century have little in common with either. The very formulation of the unitary colonial state disrupted existing power structures, no matter how indigenous agencies come to influence the practice of power on the ground. These two historians, again, do not agree on how the *longue durée* has actually operated on modern Uganda: Hanson's Buganda is a delicate web of power relations, ripped apart first by the internal violence of the late nineteenth century and then through the imposition of the *pax Britannica*; Thompson's Uganda, however, is a model of the resilience of local power dynamics and the ultimate impotence of the British imperial presence. Yet these views are by no means mutually exclusive. The experiences they describe and the approaches they adopt contribute to our understanding of how the modern state of Uganda has evolved as it has.