

*Above All Men:*

**The Changing Role of the  
Omukama in Recent Bunyoro History**

**(ca. 1800-2000 CE)**

*Oh God of Gods, King of Kings, the king of the sky and the earth! I have brought this king to ascend the throne  
succeeding his father!*

- Coronation of a New King,

J. W. Nyakatura, *Anatomy of an African Kingdom*



**H.M. King Solomon Iguru I**

The current Omukama of Bunyoro-Kitara Kingdom, H.M. Solomon Iguru I Gafabusa, like many other royal leaders of the traditional kingdoms of the Republic of Uganda during the last decade of the 20th century, was in 1994 reinstalled as hereditary king of the Nyoro people, his father, H.H. Sir Tito IV Winyi Gafabusa having been deposed by the government of Milton Obote in 1967. This recent return to traditional kingship, however, has brought with it nothing like the wide range of political power and direct influence that were enjoyed by the Omukama's great predecessors, but appears instead to be at least partially based on the present British model of constitutional monarchy, which accords to the sovereign the right to "preside" over a government, but not to rule directly in any meaningful fashion. According to the present government of President Yoweri Museveni, which ushered in this "return to royalty" during the 1990s, the new role of the Omukama is primarily to serve as a living link to the historical past of the Nyoro people, a sort of "living symbol" of the greatness of the ancient Bunyoro-Kitara Kingdom, as well as an inspiration for its people. Thus it is that today the Omukama is viewed primarily as a "cultural figure," or "traditional leader," rather than as an active participant in the decision-making processes that surround the life of the modern-day Kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara.

However, this modern institutional reshaping of the role of the Omukama in contemporary Nyoro life, the product of nearly a century of the British government's hegemony in Uganda, as well as the recent transformation of this royal office under the watchful eye of the Museveni government, is not merely the result of the restructuring and restriction of the secular role of the king, but also reflects the drastic changes that came about as a result of Christian missionaries' introduction of their faith into the life of the kingdom during the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.



**Mukama Kamurasi**

"John Hanning Speke had been the first European visitor to Bunyoro, in 1862. He described a polity of some considerable size," writes Justin Willis, "under the rule of a Mukama, Kamurasi"<sup>1</sup> (r. 1852-1869). By this time, the country had already been under the sway of the Babiito dynasty of kings for several hundred years. In the late 15th century, the first Babiito king, Rukidi I Mpuga had, after the breakup of the ancient Empire of Kitara, succeeded the *abakama* of the previous Bachwezi dynasty, founding a new dynasty of kings which would govern western and central Uganda as an independent political entity until the era of British hegemony in the 19th century. The socio-political landscape of East Africa has always been fraught with internecine rivalries and tensions, and repeated conflicts and border disputes with the neighboring Kingdom of Buganda colored much of the life of the Bunyoro state throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries. According to Henry Ford Miirima, the Press Secretary of the present Omukama, "Buganda kings could not rest until they had expanded their kingdom. Apart from a desire for wealth originating from a large kingdom, geography also favoured and tempted Buganda kings."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in 1830 the region of Toro broke off from Bunyoro, forming its own royal

"splinter" state, and effectively creating another of the kingdoms that are today recognized as "traditional" by the modern Museveni government.

In the traditional religion of the Nyoro, the god Ruhanga, who is described as "[the] Most High One, one who eats while in the skies and the bones fall, the all seeing one, the creator who created the heavens, the earth, the hills and the valleys,"<sup>3</sup> was the central figure of worship. His centrality, as well as his eminence and power, were to be reflected in the office of the Omukama, or king. The government of the country, as well as worship of the various gods and divinities who were believed to control the natural and spirit worlds of the Nyoro, was placed squarely in the hands of the Omukama, who was responsible to the gods alone for the correct and proper administration of his kingdom.

The ceremonial importance of the religious role of the Omukama within Nyoro society was considerable. "Kamurasi's authority," writes Willis, "had rested at least in part on the belief that the Mukama himself possessed a fearsome power, or *mahano*, and that the well-being of the domain was bound up with regular ceremonies performed by the Mukama, or under his supervision, at the New Moon, in which the drums and spears which formed the regalia of the Mukama played a central role."<sup>4</sup> It was the multi-faceted nature of his centrality that placed the Omukama in a pivotal position, both within the political and social frameworks of the state, and within the religious hierarchy of the kingdom, thus according to him a sacrality based upon his importance in communication with and supplication of the divine spirits that governed creation.

This is an important aspect of traditional Nyoro life, for the macrocosm of society was governed by strictly established notions of one's place in that macrocosm. "In accordance with the Nyoro philosophy of life," writes scholar A.B.T. Byaruhanga-Akiiki, "the Nyoro kings were believed to be ruling in connection with the divinely appointed line of the Babiito, Bacweezi,

Batembuzi and Ruhanga himself."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in the decades to come, it was this very hierarchically-oriented structure that was to be threatened and partially demolished, first by coercive and aggressive actions on the part of representatives of the British government, and shortly thereafter by the coming of Christianity to the ancient kingdom, this latter under the aegis of the Anglican CMS (Church Mission Society).

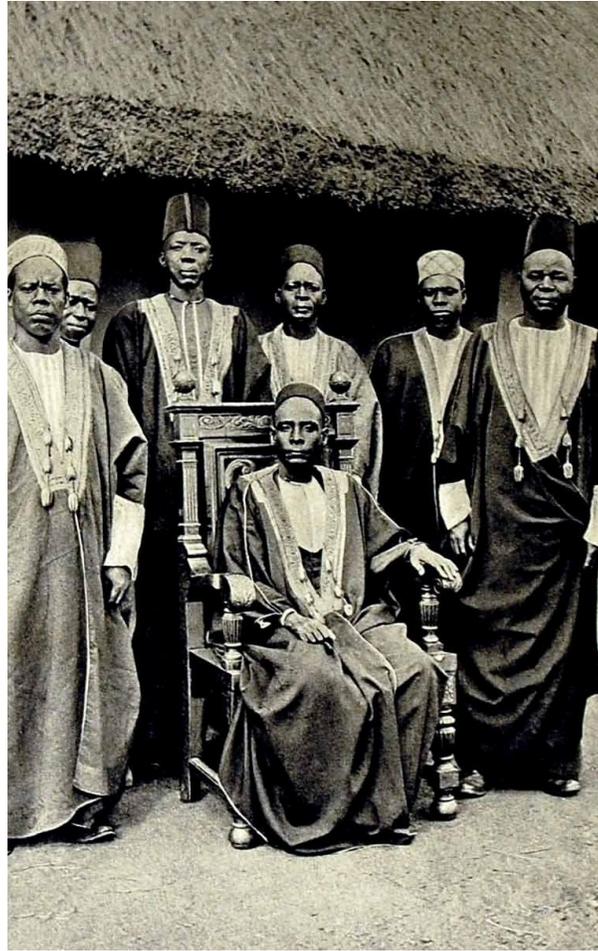
It was during the time of Kamurasi's son and heir, Chwa II Kabalega (r. 1870-1923), that both the political and the religious roles of the Omukama were to come under direct and relentless attack, due to the invasion of the country by agents of the British government. In 1872, with the arrival of Sir Stanley Baker in the region, Bunyoro found itself annexed to the British protectorate of Egypt: "Baker explained to Kabalega that he was the representative of the king of Egypt....[and ] eventually, on May 14, 1872, Baker formally annexed [Bunyoro-] Kitara to Egypt."<sup>6</sup> In the years to follow, the country would find itself increasingly dominated by British interests, despite the armed resistance of Kabalega and his followers, until in 1899 the valiant Omukama was defeated and eventually sent into exile in the Seychelles Islands.



**Omukama Cwa II Kabalega in western garb**

Although Christianity had been known in Bunyoro since the time of Speke and Baker, "these were not Christian missionaries as such. The first people to formally preach Christianity in Bunyoro were Baganda evangelists. They started out in 1895 under a lay reader named Tomasi Semfuma."<sup>7</sup> With the baptism in 1899 of the young Omukama Kitahimbwa (r. 1898-1902), who had replaced his exiled father Kabalega as the British-backed king of Bunyoro-Kitara, and his sister, Christianity soon began to spread throughout the country. "This was the occasion for the baptism of the first Christians in Bunyoro on the CMS [Church Missionary Society] side... The young king and his sister had learnt the truth in exile," writes scholar A.B.T. Byaruhanga-Akiiki, "[b]oth of them were reported to be attending classes [in Christianity] regularly, and the king was spending much of his revenue to buy testaments for his people."<sup>8</sup> Thus it was that the rapid Christianization of the country was to be effected using the same "top-down" model that was proving to be so effective for European colonialists in such other African nations as Rwanda, Urundi and Congo during the late 19th and early 20th century.

The part played by the Omukama in the conversion of the Nyoro people cannot be overestimated. Chiefs loyal to Duhaga (r. 1902-1924), Kitahimbwa's brother and successor, "realized in time that they would have to embrace the 'religion of the king.'"<sup>9</sup> In fact, write scholars Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed in their *History of the Church in Africa*, "[o]f fifty-eight men appointed chiefs in 1908, 'no less than fifty-two were Christian pupils of the senior [CMS] school at Hoima.'"<sup>10</sup> This demonstrates the fundamental effectiveness of a method of conversion that at first centered on the élite members of Nyoro society, for these very chiefs themselves, as new Christian believers, would in turn be responsible for the conversion of those directly beneath them in the social and political hierarchy of the Bunyoro kingdom.



**H.H. Omukama Duhaga II and the sacred guild**

The role of the kings of Bunyoro-Kitara in the unraveling of some of the most important socio-religious skeins of their authority, however, presents a striking paradox to the modern eye, for it was indeed largely as a direct result of his centrality in worship ceremonies designed to insure the health and well-being of the kingdom that the Omukama held sway over the hearts and minds of the people. "The king's exclusive authority was sustained by ancient myth and ritual,"<sup>11</sup> write Sundkler and Steed, and Elizabeth Isichei observes that "Christianity undermined the sacred office of the king... [as well as] the role of traditional religious specialists."<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Isichei recognizes that "[s]ometimes, however, they, or their children were among the first

converts."<sup>13</sup> Thus it can be seen that in certain cases, people at the upper levels of African society were the authors of their own loss of prestige and authority within the confines of the prevailing social structures, preferring to follow the dictates of their consciences, or the persuasive power of the missionaries, rather than to persist in following the old ways.

This casting aside of traditional Nyoro religion, in favor of the incoming Christian faith, represented an important divergence from a universally-accepted element of the Nyoro way of life. The personal prestige of the Omukama, however, was a key factor in the undoing of his own religious centrality, for as scholar John Beattie wrote of H.H. Omukama Sir Tito IV Winyi Gafabusa in 1960, "According to... myth, the present Mukama is descended in an unbroken patrilineal line from the very beginning of things,"<sup>14</sup> thus directly tying the physical person of the king to the very origin of creation itself.

Nevertheless, the "seeking" attitude manifested by the royal leaders of Bunyoro-Kitara in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is an interesting and genuinely admirable one, for their adoption of Christianity entailed the surrender of a great deal of the prestige and centrality that had traditionally been associated with their important role within Nyoro society. "In the nineteenth century," writes Byaruhanga-Akiiki, "Nyoro society was based on the philosophy of Ruhanga, the creator, and that of His subordinates, the Batmebuzi, the Bacweezi, various spirits and the Babiito, who were believed to share certain responsibilities with Ruhanga."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it is most significant that the subsequent abakama of Bunyoro-Kitara were to eschew this direct regal and personal connection of their dynasty with the divine ruler of creation, Ruhanga, and to opt instead to follow the teachings of Christianity, a faith which emphasizes the essential equality of all men before God.

Despite the widespread success of the Christian missions within the kingdom, the following decades saw repeated instances of strife in Bunyoro-Kitara, largely as a result of popular resistance to British rule. In 1907 a revolt, fueled by long-simmering grievances with the Kingdom of Buganda (which had long been Bunyoro's chief rival within the British Protectorate of Uganda), broke out against the colonial authorities and had to be put down by force. However, beginning in 1924 with the installation of H.H. Omukama Sir Tito Winyi IV Gafabusa, father of the present Omukama of Bunyoro-Kitara, an era of increased royal cooperation and *détente* began, and "in 1933 the Bunyoro Agreement provided the kingdom with a political status analogous to.. that of Buganda."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, despite the important advances made in the field of Christian missionary activity, scholar and ethnographer John Beattie wrote in 1960 that "[t]he old religious cult, centering on spirit possession, is still strong," observing as well that "there is still in Bunyoro a widespread and underlying fear and distrust of Europeans."<sup>17</sup> This observation of Beattie points to a considerable degree of ambivalence on the part of the general population of the kingdom with regard to European (i.e., British) presence and influence within its borders, and this at a point just a few short years before the foundation of the modern Republic of Uganda in 1962.

The status and prestige of the religious function of the Omukama, already reduced (or at least considerably curtailed) by the ascendancy of British power in the region, as well as by the introduction of Christianity and its widespread adoption by Nyoro people of every class, were openly rejected as fundamental principles by the central Ugandan government of Milton Obote. J.W. Nyakatura writes that "[t]o further make for unity it was found necessary to abolish the kings and the traditional chiefs and to create a unitary form of government."<sup>18</sup> This action on the part of the new republic sounded what many believed at that time to have been the "death knell"

of the old system and its traditional vision of the nature and orientation of Nyoro society. The subsequent administration of the dictator Idi Amin Dada, who ousted Obote in 1971, did nothing to enhance the profile of the traditional kings of any of the constituent regions of Uganda, and indeed, many members of the royal families of these various kingdoms, such as those of Toro and Buganda, as well as Tito Winyi's heir, Solomon Iguru, preferred to live abroad during the turbulent years of the Amin era.

After the ouster of Amin in 1979, the subsequent restoration of an Obote-led government and the coming of the government of President Yoweri Museveni to power in 1986, a new age of reconciliation and renewal had begun for proponents of the restoration of traditional kingship in Uganda. Traditional kings found themselves once again at the center of Ugandan national affairs, but this time in purely ceremonial roles, rather than in the positions of political and religious authority to which their august forefathers had been accustomed. A new national constitution, ratified in 1995, recognized the importance and centrality of these kings to the life of the Ugandan nation as a whole. Section 246 of this new constitution outlined the role of the traditional kings as follows:

*(1) Subject to the provisions of this Constitution, the institution of traditional leader or cultural leader may exist in any area of Uganda in accordance with the culture, customs and traditions or wishes and aspirations of the people to whom it applies.*

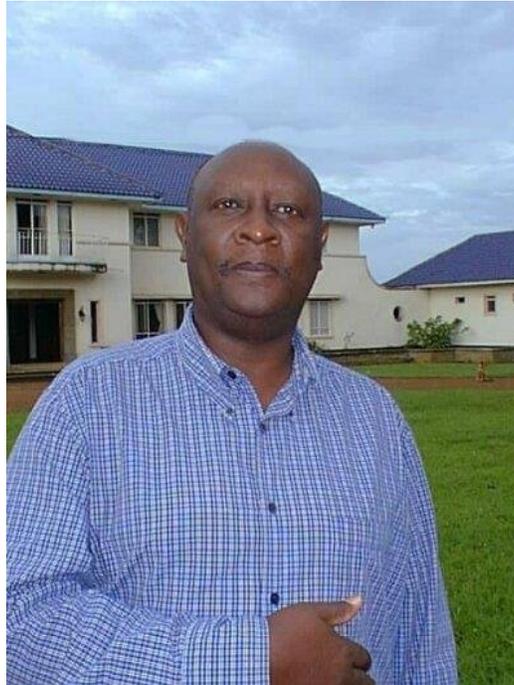
-Constitution of the Republic of Uganda [Kampala: Government Printing Office, 1995]

Furthermore, the newly-recognized "traditional leaders" could thenceforth openly be accorded the same "allegiance and privileges" historically considered the birthright of their royal forebears. However, conspicuous by its absence was any mention of religious or political power within the structures of the newly-reconstituted kingdoms, for the Museveni government, while eager to enunciate its support for the "soft power" associated with the reintegration of the institution of traditional or cultural leaders in Uganda, was also wary of establishing any potential rivals in the realm of "hard power."

As has been seen in the case of the ancient Kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara, the erosion of certain aspects and appurtenances of the once multi-faceted role of the Omukama in Nyoro society has been the result of two main factors, 19th-century British political and military might in the region, and the subsequent arrival and early 20th-century spread of Christianity, initially via the Anglican Church Missionary Society, throughout Uganda. These two factors effectively paved the way for the wholesale abolition of the offices of the kings by the Obote government in 1967, and it was over twenty-five years later that the reintegration of these kings into the fabric of Ugandan society, this time as "traditional" rather than effective rulers, became part of central government policy. Thus, the present king of Bunyoro-Kitara, H.M. Omukama Solomon Iguru I Gafabusa, operates in a distinctly different socio-political atmosphere than that which prevailed during the reign of his late father, H.H. Omukama Sir Tito IV Winyi Gafabusa, who enjoyed at least a certain limited measure of personal power and political autonomy under the British protectorate system then in force in Uganda.

Today, the Omukama's role in Ugandan society is primarily to serve as a symbol of the Bunyoro-Kitara Kingdom, although his personal opinions about various aspects of national politics and socio-religious matters are frequently voiced straightforwardly and forcefully. Thus,

although his role is largely a ceremonial and symbolic one, the current Omukama does use his position of prominence to air his personal views on matters he believes to be of importance to the well-being of both his kingdom and to Uganda as a whole.



**H.M. Omukama Solomon Iguru I Gafabusa**

Therefore, where once his royal ancestors had exercised direct power of life and death over their subjects, and had held unquestioned sway over key aspects of the political and religious life of the nation, today's Omukama finds that his ability to influence events and situations depends primarily on the prestige of his very personal connection to the collective historical heritage of Bunyoro-Kitara Kingdom. Although no longer "above all men" in any effective legal, cultural or constitutional sense, the present Omukama represents an important link to the shared past of this great and historical African kingdom.

Thus, despite the substantial reductions in his direct royal power and prerogatives, which have many of their roots in the adoption of the Christian faith by his royal predecessor Omukama

Kitahimbwa (and which is the very faith professed by the king himself, as well as by the majority of his subjects), H.M. Solomon Iguru I continues nonetheless to play a significant and abiding role in the life of the Bunyoro-Kitara Kingdom as it moves forward into the future.

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- 1 Justin Willis, "A Portrait for the Mukama: Monarchy and Empire in Colonial Bunyoro, Uganda," (in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 34, No. 1, March, 2006), pg. 106
  - 2 Henry Ford Miiirima, "Bunyoro-Kitara/Buganda Relations in the 19th and 20th Centuries," (Press Office of Bunyoro-Kitara Kingdom, 2005), pg. 9
  - 3 A.B.T. Byaruhanga-Akiiki, *Religion in Bunyoro* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1982), pg. 13
  - 4 Willis, pg. 107
  - 5 Byaruhanga-Akiiki, pg. 205
  - 6 J.W. Nyakatura, *Anatomy of an African Kingdom: A History of Bunyoro-Kitara* (New York: Anchor Press, 1973), pg. 120
  - 7 Byaruhanga-Akiiki, pg. 95
  - 8 *ibid.*, pg. 97
  - 9 Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pg. 588
  - 10 *ibid.*
  - 11 *ibid.*
  - 12 Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995), pg. 134
  - 13 *ibid.*
  - 14 John Beattie, *Bunyoro: An African Kingdom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson, 1960), pg. 16
  - 15 Byaruhanga-Akiiki, pg. 204
  - 16 Willis, pg. 109
  - 17 Beattie, pgs. 4 and 23
  - 18 Nyakatura, pg. 242