

## **A SACRAL KINGSHIP IN BUGANDA?**

### **AN ESSAY IN THE MEANING OF 'RELIGION'**

**By**

**F.B. Welbourn**

**Department of Religious Studies**

**University of Bristol**

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"In former times the king of Ganda", wrote Irstam (1944, 142), "certainly died a ritual death, though the tribe no longer has any recollection of the fact". This is an outstanding example of Irstam's need to fit facts into his theory of a general pattern of sacral kingship in Africa, probably introduced from the Near East by Hamitic conquerors. Other writers have stressed the peculiarly secular character of the kabakaship (e.g., Ingham, 1958, 17). Gale (1956, 72, 87) on the other hand - studying one particular kabaka, and without any rash attempt to compare with essentially different kings elsewhere - argues that Kabaka Mutesa I (1856-84) was "Buganda in person, Lord of Life and Death, Master of himself and his People, their only true Religion, their covenant with the supernatural world....a God".

With the first three clauses in this description there is nothing to quarrel. Gales is surely right when he says, "the Missions were placed in the position of merchants spreading out their wares at the feet of the Kabaka which he criticised favourably or adversely, but never bought". Matesa was treating Catholics, Protestants and Muslims, as he treated all the indigenous institutions - including the traditional religious institutions - as counters in his own search for power. Insofar as his subjects adopted one of the new religions, the vast majority (the martyrs - both Muslim and Christian - may have been exceptions) did so not because they believed them to be true but in obedience to their kabaka.

But to go on to say that the kabaka was "their only true Religion" is to beg a definition; "their covenant with the supernatural world" suggests a felt need for such a covenant for which there is little evidence' "a God", in contemporary western thought, has overtones of meaning which it is difficult to find in the attitude to the kabaka of Ganda in the nineteenth century. There is other questionable statements and interpretations in Gale's presentation, but the purpose of this paper is to argue that Gale was right in his fundamental contention that the kabakaship was more important than any conventionally "religious" institutions in Ganda society. The kabakaship is central to any understanding of religious, as of political, history in Buganda. Traditional Ganda society, at the time of European entry in the nineteenth century, has been fully described by

Roscoe (1911); and he can be supplemented by the more scientific accounts of Mair (1934) and Fallers (1964). Welbourn (1962) has summarised the religious concepts.

A reasonable reconstruction suggests that Ganda were originally organized in semi-autonomous segmentary clans centred on the burial grounds. Certain features of this society can be selected for the purposes of this paper

In the first case there was a strong solidarity expressed in the extension of kinship terms to all members of the same generation, the use of "we" and "our" where westerners would speak of "I" or "My" (Fallers, 1964, 72). At the same time, as brilliantly described by Richards (Fallers, 1964, 259-67), children were expected to give absolute obedience to their fathers, who had complete power over their persons, and to show gratitude for harsh parental punishment.

Secondly, the head of each clan, and each segment, had both a social and a ritual function. He was called Kabaka; members of the senior line of a segment were balangira, a term otherwise applied to male descendents of a kabaka (Fallers, 1964, 71). It is of course impossible to say whether this terminology preceeded the establishment of a centralized kabakaship, though there is some evidence that it did so. He was the personification of all his predecessors and, at the same time, had access to their ghosts. At least in some cases, this access was mediated through the lower jawbone, which was kept in a special shrine; and for all Ganda it was to the jawbone that the ghost particularly clung.

At birth the umbilical cord was preserved and used later in the clan naming ceremony. In the case of twins, it had further ritual uses; and all placements had a ghost to be treated with caution. At the death of a man the body was washed and buried in comfort on a pile of barkcloths. A shrine was built for the ghost, which was kept supplied with fire and drink. The grave was thatched and some of the widows appointed as guardians. In all cases (even of children) an heir must be appointed to the deceased's role; and, in the case of a man, this entailed considerable ceremonial, offering of gifts and the selection of lubuga, one of the heir's sisters who played an integral part in the installation and remained in the household till her marriage.

Failure to appoint an heir caused the particular displeasure of the ghost. In brief it may be suggested that clan society was felt to consist of both the living and the dead. Each individual filled a particular role in the social structure - in relation not only to the living but to the dead; and failure to fill any role by the appointment of an heir risked the collapse of the whole structure. Although there are other non-empirical concepts which can probably be traced to this period in Ganda history - localised nature-spirits and sorcery - the ancestor cult seems to have been central. If there was no "sacred" in Durkheim's sense - the ancestors were an integral, if especially powerful, factor in profane daily life - the situation can be analysed in his categories. The ultimate concern of clan society was the successful continuity of the clan; and it found expression in the terms described.

Perhaps in the fifteenth century (Oliver, 1959, 133) political centralisation began to take place under a kabakaship which gradually extended its control of the country and its effectiveness in war against the neighbouring Kyoro. The political problem, for both purposes, was to weld into a tribe, men who had been primarily clansmen. This the kabakas appear to have tackled along two axis. Empirically, while the kabakas originally ruled as primus inter pares, the hereditary clan heads were gradually replaced, as district administrators, by men arbitrarily appointed by the kabaka and subject to equally arbitrary dismissal.

Particular ritual offices continued to be associated with the clans. Later kabakas were to create a third force of office-holders who could be played off against the other two groups; and the priests of the balubaals\* (see below) could be used in the same way. It was into this intricate system of divide and rule that Mutesa tried to draw both Muslim Arabs and Christian missionaries.

Mythologically the kabakas had to assimilate themselves to the clan system; and perhaps this meant no more than to develop the implication of being primus inter pares among the clan heads. All Ganda became grandchildren of Kintu, the legendary first kabaka, who was jjajja of the tribe as clan founders were jjajja of their clans. The kabaka was therefore not only Ssaabasajja, "chief of men", demanding personal loyalty and deserving praise-names as conqueror, provider and rightful autocrat. He was also Ssaabataka, "chief of clan heads".

As such, he was the father of his people, the source of all authority, whose exactions and punishments they could accept with gratitude. But he also adopted his mother's totem and married into all other clans. His children were their children. He as himself their child, and their ambivalent feeling towards the kabaka, as father and child, is well described by Richards (Fallers, 1964, 285f.). Their attitude towards him was at the same time submissive and maternal. As Ssaabataka he also had the final word in decisions as a succession.

All heirs - even when there was no dispute - were presented to him. He was the personification of all his predecessors; and he alone, through the jawbone and umbilical cord preserved and tended in special shrines which are still intact as centres of pilgrimage, had access to their ghosts. Officers of the shrines were replaced, though the centuries, by their clans. At death there was a ritual washing and drying (Roscoe says "embalming"; but there is nothing in his description to warrant this word) of the corpse undertaken not by kin but by specified officers of the court. The body (from which the jawbone was disarticulated after sufficient decay had set in) was buried in a separate shrine, where certain widows and officers of the dead kabaka, together with hundreds of common people, were killed to accompany him

This shrine also, though it was of less importance than that of the jawbone, was preserved and guarded. Apart from the drying of the corpse and the human sacrifice there is nothing here but elaboration of the ceremony attending the funeral of a commoner. Roscoe described the funeral of a chief as already more elaborate than that

of a peasant; Richards (Fallers, 1964, 270ff.) makes it clear that the respect demanded by a chief from his clients was only less than that expected by the kabaka of all his subjects; and the ghosts even of peasant children required special attention (Roscoe, 1911, 126f.).

It is legitimate to attribute both the special washing and drying of the kabaka's corpse, and the human sacrifice, not to any special supernatural status of the kabaka but simply to the need to give, to both his corpse and his ghost, treatment appropriate to the honour with which he was held in life. Similarly it is possible to regard his installation ceremony, in which again lubuga played an integral part, (Lubuga also appears in a lubaalo initiation rite (Welbourn, 1964) as an elaboration of the clan ceremony installing an heir, with officers of the kingdom filling the roles of kinamon.

Mugema head of the Monkey Clan, who played a leading role in the installation, was, indeed also Nnakasadda ritual parent of the kabaka. "There appears to have been in Ganda society", writes Fallers (1964, 72), "an unstable balance between the unilineal descent group organization and that of the kingdom - a balance which during the past century has swung more and more in favour of the Kabaka-centred kingdom".

Insofar as the kabaka was successful in encouraging this swing, it was because he had established his mythological role both as father of all his people - at one and the same time the source of all authority and an object of tender care - and as clan head of a wider social grouping - the keystone without which the whole structure would collapse. There is no suggestion here that he was a "covenant with the supernatural world". It is rather that the old clan society, of which the ghosts were an integral part, had faded in importance.

What now mattered was the successful continuity of the tribe; and it was the kabaka who had become the "symbol of tribal glory". "Apart from this the particular structure of society received little ritual support" (Fallers, 1964, 286, 101). There was, however, another category of non-empirical beings which requires consideration. The balubaale (sing., lubaale) were a heterogeneous collection of naturo and her-spirits, many even of the former being fitted into human genealogies. Indeed, Kagwa (1905, 229) states that, in origin, they were all "merely men"; oral tradition records an elevation to this status in the first half of the nineteenth century (Naimbi, 1956, 146ff.); and Naimbi has privately reported a much more recent case.

As it developed, the lubaale cult seems to have been directed primarily towards ancestors who, owing to exceptional qualities in life, achieved after death tribal - as opposed to clan or family - significance; and they were accorded much the same temporal honours as a kabaka, with whom they interchanged gifts. Unlike clan ancestors on the one hand and ghosts of kabakas on the other, they were available to all Ganda and were concerned with a wide range of national and individual crises.

There was no creation myth - the only myth of origin being concerned with the appearance of Kintu, the first (but human) kabaka, his marriage to the daughter of

Ggulu (lubaale of the sky) and the introduction of sickness and death by his brother-in-law, Walumbe. It is worth noting that folklore, as recorded by Kagva (1927), suggests very little "sacred" or "supernatural" about these figures. It is Kintu who makes Ggulu marvel at his skills; and, in a later story, Walumbo appears as little more than a patient creditor.

Besides Ggulu, two other balubaale have claim to regard as original "high gods"; but, by the nineteenth century, all three had been assimilated as rather unimportant figures in the general lubaale cult. In this connection it is perhaps significant that, while Kintu's steward became lubaale (Naimbe, 1956, 124), Kintu was simply lost. The lineage, from which came the most important balubaale, was that of Bukalu who came to Buganda as a follower of Kintu; and, though they seem to have negotiated with later kabakas on equal terms, they made no more absolute claims.

There is here a suggestion that, as the kabaka in life was superior to all men, so his ghost was, by nature, at least not inferior to the balubaale. It was he who allocated land for their shrines and (as in all cases of succession) approved appointments of their priests. Although the mediums of balubaale might come from any clan, the priests were normally drawn from particular clans. The origin of the cult itself is obscure; but it certainly had links with the clans; and its priests might join forces with the clan heads in opposition to the growing power of the kabaka. The latter frequently consulted them in both national and private causes; but there is evidence of conflict between the two institutions.

Kabaka Tebandeke, angry at the rewards demanded for a service, destroyed the shrines of all balubaalo. He became mad and was cured through becoming a medium of lubaale Mukaga. His successor as kabaka refused to succeed also to the mediumship, which passed to a cadet branch of the royal house. It is notable that mediumship is not normally hereditary; and this story may represent an attempt either by the priests to get control of the kabakaship, or the reverse. In either case, it ended in a clear division between religious and political authority. Symbolic of this division - though they may well have been of earlier origin - were hills taboo to the kabaka and therefore available as sanctuary to his subjects.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century Buganda was engaged in rapid territorial expansion. There was constant conflict with the Nyoro, serious threat from Egypt and perplexity caused by the arrival of Arabs from the coast and of occasional white explorers - not least by the power of their firearms. The traditional religious concepts were incapable of dealing with the expanding scale of political relationships. Something new had to be found.

One possibility was that - as in similar circumstances in the Roman empire - there should be overt deification of the kabaka. Suna II appears to have made explicit a claim which was perhaps latent in the whole development of the kabakaship. "Do you not know what I am lubaale of the earth who rules the balubaale of the sky?" (Naimbi, 1956,

147); and Burton (1860) records that he made a similar claim over against Allah of the Arabs.

But, just as the divine Roman emperors gave way to Christian monotheism, so a universalistic monotheism - first in its Muslim, then its Christian, form - reached Buganda before the deification of the kabakas had actually taken place. Mutesa I experimented with both Islam and Christianity, while ensuring that all power remained in his own hands. His son Mwanga tried to destroy them both; and it was left to the administrative chiefs - men who had never had religious symbols of their own - to grasp the possibilities of Christianity as the mythological dimension of a Buganda which wished to enter effectively into the new age (Welbourn, 1962, 180). They preserved, through a reformed kabakaship, their continuity with the past. But they accepted - some of them in deeply personal terms - the Christian-western assumption that the ultimate concern of society must be a transcendent God.

Sixty years later the Ganda were to discover that, in practical terms, their association with the west was to mean political subordination to a unitary Uganda. For refusal to take the preliminary steps, Kabaka Mutesa II was deported in 1953 (Fallers, 1964, 321-6). It was only then that there became overt, what had perhaps perhaps remained latent for the majority of Ganda, that their ultimate concern was still Buganda and the kabaka its symbol. His deportation was Buganda's shame, his return in 1955 his triumphant healing of that shame (Fallers, 1964, 238, 326).

In the interval Christian congregations dwindled. Lubaale shrines once more appeared in banana gardens. "The new gods have betrayed us", it was said. "Only the old Gods can restore the kabaka". The function of both old and new was seen as purely instrumental to Buganda's glory. The form and language of the Christian psalms was used to describe Mutesa as "our shepherd", "our rook and our everlasting strength" (Welbourn, 1965, 42). On 31 December 1960, faced with national elections which were to prepare the way for the independence of a unitary state, Buganda declared that her agreement with the British was ended and that she was now, in our right, independent.

Faced with further elections in 1962, she formed Kabaka Yokka (the "Kabaka Alone" party) to fight them and to give her the balance of power in the National Assembly. In the form of a Christian litany the balubaale were summoned to re-establish the old order. They were said to have given all power to the kabaka.

Uganda became independent in 1962 under a federal constitution with reserved special powers to the kabaka and his government. In 1963 Uganda became a republic and Mutesa II of Buganda became also first President of Uganda. It was because neither he nor the Ganda were able to reconcile his conflicting roles - that of elected representative in the larger society, symbol of ultimate concern in the lesser - that he eventually had to flee the country. Until the publication of the Uganda Government Proposals for a New Constitution (1967) there seemed to be three possibilities for Buganda's future (though, at this distance, all interpretation must be deeply suspect).

In the first place she might - as the Uganda Government originally wished - have elected a new kabaka from the descendants of Mutesa I. In terms of social psychology, this was never a very viable possibility. As a constitutional measure, it is now ruled out by the proposal to abolish kingship throughout Uganda; and there can be little doubt that, from a national point of view, this proposal is wise. A new kabaka might have been genuinely anxious to co-operate with the national government - as Mutesa II with the British when he first came to the throne. But it seems likely, in view of Buganda's past, that he would in time have become the symbol and instrument of a new intransigence.

Secondly, Ganda may submit to the new Constitution and come to regard themselves as primarily Ugandans. In that case, they will need no kabaka.

But, thirdly, they may insist - as they did in 1953 - that only the return of the kabaka can make possible their full co-operation with the national government. It has, indeed, been suggested that a successful coup de'etat against the present regime might turn to the exiled kabaka as a source of legitimate authority. Religious concepts may fill a number of needs.

They may be the symbol of: (a) social solidarity and ambition; (b) a means of dealing with both social and individual crises; (c) a means of dealing with both social and individual crises; (d) in a plural society the focus of private and sectional identity; (e) a means of intellectual understanding. In Buganda, insofar as it had become a tribe and not merely a federation of clans, the kabakaship seems to have met the first and second, the balubaale the third, Christianity and Islam the fourth and fifth.

If religion is concerned with belief in non-empirical beings, then there is no evidence that the kabaka ever became (whatever might have been implicit) a religious figure. He was not "divine" because such "divinities" as the Ganda recognized were no more than men, pursuing in the world of the dead the roles and status of their earthly existence. He was not a "priest-king" - what Gale calls a "covenant with the supernatural" - because, even if "supernatural" is the right word for being so natural in origin as ghosts and balubaale, tribal society - as contrasted with the clans - claimed no supernatural reference. The kabaka was enough. He was not "sacred" in Durkheim's sense, because the ritual surrounding him was not heterogeneous from, but a development of, that of the profane life of a peasant.

If, on the other hand, as Tempola (1959) thinks, religion has to do with a hierarchy of vital forces from God to material things, then it may be said that, for Ganda, the head of the hierarchy had become the kabakaship. The living kabaka might be inferior to the balubaale (though Suna claimed that he was not so). His ghost was at least equal with them. This must be what Gale meant when he spoke of the kabaka as "their only true Religion". But it is to understand religion in terms not of non-empirical beings - not of "the sacred" or "the idea of the holy" - but of ultimate concern. It would be fascinating to enquire why it is that some men, and some societies, can express their ultimate concern in terms of temporal symbols, while others require the trans-historical.

For the present it is enough to say that one of the weaknesses of "the study of religion" is that we have not yet decided what it is we study.