

# NON-COASTAL EAST AFRICAN PEOPLE AND THE SLAVE TRADE

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## THE CASE OF BUSOGA IN UGANDA

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# Inside...

Abstract .....	2
Introduction .....	2
Uganda’s case .....	2
Domestic slavery & Busoga .....	3
The Arab factor .....	4
The Bukaleba site .....	5
Slavery evidence .....	7
Threats to the site – climate change .....	9
Conclusion .....	11
References .....	12

## Abstract

Although there is an extensive literature on the history and anthropology of the Great Lakes or interlacustrine region of East Africa<sup>1</sup>, very few works are focused on the occurrence of slavery. This contrasts with the historiography of other African regions, where slavery and the slave trade constitute prominent themes, and presupposes that the slave trade was not an important element in shaping this part of the continent, not only in terms of economic outcomes, but also regarding cultural and social outcomes. By analysing the available literature and conducting interviews, this paper traces slavery and the slave trade in the Busoga sub-region in Uganda and attempt to demonstrate that there is still surviving evidence of the once widespread practice in the interior of East Africa.

## Introduction

Henri Medard and Shane Doyle (2007)<sup>2</sup> observe that, until recently, historians working on the Great Lakes region considered slavery as never having been an important feature of the Great Lakes societies or that it existed for only a short period of time in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even then, it was seen as of marginal significance, so deserved little examination. Medard and Doyle further note that European sources relating to slavery in the region also tended to be distorted by the alternating imperative of concealment or propaganda: thus, where slavery persisted, it was an embarrassment to colonial officials, and from the colonial records, it would be impossible to guess that these societies had been structured around slavery only a few decades previously. Yet a justification for colonial conquest was the eradication of slavery – hence the need for

concealment, for its persistence would be interpreted “back home” as a failure.

This may explain why, whenever slavery in Africa is discussed, the focus is normally placed on West Africa where the Trans-Atlantic route carried millions of slaves from Africa to the European colonies in the New World. Where it concerns East Africa, the emphasis is usually on the coastal area, where there is still existing evidence of slavery, such as through former slave markets/chambers. The history of slavery in the interior of East Africa is therefore poorly documented and hence not much known.

In the absence of reliable colonial sources, Medard and Doyle (ibid) note that Africanist historians have tended to turn to oral or written African sources instead. They also observe that the documents written by Africans in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries mention slavery, but only briefly, with ‘most of the authors high in the chiefly hierarchy and not so preoccupied with such lowly people’.

## Uganda’s case

Slavery in Uganda is reported to be as old as local political institutions that used to raid each other for slaves. Among them were Buganda, Ankole, Bunyoro, Toro and Busoga (which was then governed under chiefdoms and clans, as opposed to the other four that were organised as kingdoms). The Buganda kingdom is reported to have enjoyed dominance over the others, especially with the arrival of the missionaries and British colonialists whom the Baganda served as their collaborators.

While an important justification fronted (not only by British, German and Belgian

<sup>1</sup>In physical terms, the Great Lakes region of East Africa extends from Lakes Albert and Kyoga in the north to Lake Victoria in the east, Lake Tanganyika in the south and Lakes Edward and Kivu in the west. With today’s borders, it includes southern and western Uganda, north-western Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda and the eastern fringes of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The languages spoken in this region belong to the Great Lakes Bantu family.

<sup>2</sup>Medard, Henri & Doyle, Shane. “Slavery in the Great Lakes Region of East Africa.” *James Currey Ltd* (2007), pp. 2

imperialists but also by Christian missionaries) for the takeover of Africa was to stop the slave trade, in Uganda, publications such as *The Church Missionary Gleaner* and *The Uganda Journal*, where missionaries and imperialists used to publish their articles, show that the topic was similarly avoided. Further, the absence of post-conquest reference to slavery in Uganda, Medard and Doyle (2007) note, may be indicative of a desire to avoid discussing the subject, as these new intruders also benefitted from the practice of slavery. The authors refer to the porters that accompanied the explorers and missionaries as slaves. They are also reported to have owned slaves in their new homes in Africa.

Even for African historians, “slavery was a dangerous subject for them, better to be avoided or belittled (the major reason for Baganda chiefs to fall out of favour with British administration in the 1890s was the accusation of slavery)” (Medard and Doyle, 2007). The authors further note that “The Ugandan authors were Christians, and so did not wish to appear too knowledgeable about slavery, just as too much knowledge about women suggested sin (to make matters worse, most slaves were women).”

### *Domestic slavery & Busoga*

Medard and Doyle argue that the existence of words such as *bayidu* or *bakopi*, which referred to unfree labourers or slaves, point to the existence of the practice. They also note that distinctions existed between the *abanyage* (those who were captured in war) and *abagule* (those who were purchased).

Y.K. Lubogo (1960) also notes that Busoga was a source of domestic slaves and concubines for Buganda, but military raids for slaves clearly increased with the arrival of Arab traders (as will be explained in detail in the subsequent section). Basoga were also exported as domestic slaves to Bukedi,

Bunyoro and Kavirondo, Lubogo records. Similarly, Fallers (1960) states that one of the causes of increased raids in Busoga during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the need to obtain slaves for sale to the Arabs, who had established a base for their operations in Buganda.

Busoga was well known in Buganda as being a populous district, and therefore attractive for slave-raiding. Kitching (1912) writes that Busoga was at one time the garden of Uganda, and a thriving province. It earned this reputation because of the richness of South Busoga, mainly of the chiefdom. Kitching reports on the prosperity of this area in 1890 and is recorded in the travellers’ accounts of Peters, Gedge, Jackson, Lugard, Smith, Tucker, Ashe, Portal, Colvile, Declé, Tiernan, Austin, Sykes, H. Cook, Hall, and Anson. One of the well-known early travellers, Bishop Tucker (1908), also writes that in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Busoga was “naturally rich and fertile, with immense flocks and herds, it had long been the happy hunting ground for the more warlike and strenuous race dwelling on the opposite banks of the Nile, who, not content with carrying off their sheep and goats, had enslaved for bartering away in exchange for guns and powder, thousands of men and women”.

Between 1856 and 1884, Lubogo (1960) records a series of wars that were fought between Busoga and Buganda, resulting in massacres of people, with many others captured as slaves. Baganda armies for instance penetrated as far as the Kigulu chiefdom in central Busoga at least three times, with Mutesa I (who was the Buganda king between 1856-1884) creating much destruction in Bugabula chiefdom. In southeast Busoga, in one such expedition in the middle of the century, Ssuuna II (who was the Buganda king between 1832 and 1856) carried 2,000 women from Wakoli (the

chief of Bukooli chiefdom), and overran Kigulu chiefdom. H.M. Stanley (1878) testifies that in 1875, southwest Busoga was severely ransacked by Mutesa I's armies passing through to fight the people of the Buvuma islands. The army consisted of 2500 people, Stanley writes, and they stayed scavenging in the area for two months.

Tuma (1973) also quotes Alexander Mackay of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) who estimated in 1881 that three raiding expeditions were sent to Busoga annually by Buganda. Most of these raids would be limited to the southern part of the region although, towards the last part of the century, some of the raiding expeditions extended their activities to northern Busoga as well. The booty the Baganda carried off, according to Tuma (1973), included thousands of women and children, cattle, goats and ivory.

Among Busoga's renowned slaves were St. Matia Mulumba, who was captured from Chief Luba's Bunha chiefdom and St. Gonzaga Gonza who was captured from Chief Zibondo's Bulamogi chiefdom. Both Mulumba and Gonzaga would later become pages in the king of Buganda's palace. They both converted to Christianity with the arrival of the missionaries and are among the martyrs who were executed for rebelling against the king of Buganda between 1885 and 1887, with 37 of them killed on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1886. Both were subsequently canonised by the Catholic Church.

Medard and Doyle (2007) assert that slavery and warfare were intricately intertwined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Buganda kingdom, part of a process through which Buganda sought to impose itself on the surrounding region, to effect commercial control over its neighbours' economies, and to achieve external security as well as internal cohesion.

They also assert that some slaves had greater privileges and opportunities than others. They were sometimes even groomed for future political status and formed part of Buganda's auxiliary forces. John Roscoe (1915) mentions 'servants' accompanying chiefs to war, and Mackay describes chiefs and their slaves when observing an army being organised.

Medard and Doyle (2007) further note that slaves became Buganda's primary commercial export after the 1850s. Buganda and its allies sold slaves for cash or exchanged them for gifts such as fighting equipment, which they badly needed for their expansionist policies.

These raids tended to be brutal and often led to considerable human suffering and devastation, Tuma (1973) notes that one of the important effects of the Buganda raids was the creation in southern Busoga an extensive network of foot-paths, which were largely used by the raiding parties and the booty they had seized. Some of these foot-paths would later form part of the eastern route, which was increasingly used as a caravan route linking Buganda and Busoga to the east coast in the region's long-distance trade.

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### *The Arab factor*

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Thornton (1999) argues that the slave trade grew rapidly in the East African region because slavery was already well established. Medard and Doyle (2007) also note that to argue that slavery was ancient, however, does not mean that the institution never evolved. It was indeed modified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the arrival of Arab businessmen from the coast, traversing through Busoga to Buganda. Lubogo (1960) records that the Arabs (the *Abalungana*) first arrived in Busoga in 1880 (in Bugweri chiefdom) and they were operating from Chief Luba's palace in Bukaleba in 1890.

A major commercial caravan route then emerged, running through South Busoga. According to B.W. Langlands (1971), this route ran through Butembe-Bunha<sup>3</sup>, which was then a single chiefdom. This created a demand for able-bodied slaves to help the Arabs carry ivory to the coast. Busoga afforded the nearest and probably largest resource, as Baganda became slave agents for the Arabs.

### *The Bukaleba site*

As Buganda spread its dominance over its neighbours, it is reported that it helped Chief Luba establish his leadership over Bunha. The chief built his palace on the peninsula currently known as the Bukaleba central forest reserve, and would take orders from the king of Buganda. It is for instance reported that the death of Bishop James Hannington and his 48 porters in 1885 in Kyando (which is adjacent to Bukaleba) was on orders of the king of Buganda. The bishop had arrived in Kyando with 50 men using the caravan route, which went through Bunha-Butembe as the last gateway into Buganda. It is reported that the king of Buganda had been warned by the Arabs that whoever would overthrow his kingdom would come from the east. He therefore instructed Chief Luba to report any intruder to him. When Chief Luba sighted Bishop Hannington with his men, he therefore reported to the king of Buganda who gave him orders to execute them. Only two of the 50 men escaped.

Before his death, the Bishop is reported to have encountered a ‘mob of Baganda raiders’ in Busoga. H.B. Thomas (1940) quotes the Bishop to have said: “The raiders hacked down hundreds of banana trees. The fertile country was devastated.”

As a close ally of Buganda, Chief Luba is reported to have been one of the beneficiaries of the slave trade, selling slaves for cash or exchanging them for gifts such as fighting equipment.

There is still evidence of money exchange at Bukaleba in the form of coins collected by the community over the years. There are many one-rupee coins dated 1840 issued by the East India Company.

It is also reported that the significance of Bukaleba in the slave trade potentially influenced the location of a British garrison to check slaving activities in the area. Further, when the British colonialists rooted for a centralised form of leadership in Busoga in 1893, Bukaleba was chosen as Busoga’s headquarters with the chief of Bunha then, Nyago-Zigombye-Luba, treated as a paramount chief.

The garrison was commanded by a Major Thurston in company of Nubian<sup>4</sup> soldiers. According to 74-year-old Tom Baise, it is the Nubians who were known for engaging in slave trade. So, if they were close allies of the British, it means even the British were involved in slave trade. Baise, who is the clan head of BaiseMunha, the ruling clan in Bunha chiefdom (from which Chief Luba is supposed to come from), refutes the fact that Chief Luba was a beneficiary of slave trade. Instead, he says that his forefathers fought the British and Nubians who wanted to traffic their people.

It is reported that there was a Nubian mutiny at Bukaleba in 1897. David W. Cohen (1986) writes that the revolting Sudanese troops were on safari with some Europeans:

<sup>3</sup> Butembe and Bunha (also written as Bunha) are two of the 11 chiefdoms that constitute Busoga kingdom. They are both located in the southern region of Busoga. The title for the hereditary chief of Butembe is Ntembe while that of Bunha is Luba. Jinja, Busoga’s ‘capital city’ is located in Butembe, while Bukaleba and Kyando (mentioned in this paper) are located in Bunha.

<sup>4</sup> The Sudanese Nubians developed as a distinct group as a result of Egypt’s military expansion south into Sudan in the first half of the nineteenth century. Among Sudanese Nubians were professional mercenaries who were used by both Africans and Europeans to capture slaves, ivory and minerals from Gondokoro (southern Sudan) during the 19th century. In the process, they adopted elements of Arabic culture. This is the group from which the British military administrator in Uganda, Lord Frederick Lugard, recruited a band of mercenaries to keep law and order. (<https://theconversation.com/>)

*“They did a lot of havoc in this fort, releasing prisoners and killing many people, including three Europeans, one of whom was Major Thurston. The Sudanese were driven from Bukaleba in 1898 and went to Bunyoro. When the fighting was over, many Basoga were chosen to return to Mombasa the equipment that had been used in this fighting. The chiefs were also asked to escort their people.*

*When these people came back, they had contracted sleeping-sickness, which ravaged the area leaving it [so] deserted that it was later turned into a forest reserve.”*

Baise, however, believes that sleeping sickness was a biological weapon used by the British to punish the Basoga for having killed Bishop Hannington: “We suspect that it is the whites that brought us sleeping sickness because it was devastating only in Bunha,” says Baise. “So many of our people died. Bunha got deserted, with those who managed to escape, running to neighbouring

areas. My grandfather and father escaped from Mawuta to Waina, and the epidemic never crossed to this part of Busoga.”

As a result, traces of slave trade were left intact as the area was depopulated. Following the end of the epidemic, Baise says, the British were now in control of Bunha and would decide which areas to be opened up for public resettlement. “They opened up in phases. They would say five villages are now open for you to settle in, and these were areas that were not that significant to us,” Baise notes. “Our historical sites where the BaiseMunha ruled over Bunha were all taken by the central government.”

Bukaleba was first gazetted in 1932 as a natural forest measuring about 1,000 hectares. The area was also a habitat for wild animals like buffalos, monkeys and leopards, which have since migrated to other areas or were killed.



*One of the caves at the banks of Lake victoria*

## *Slavery evidence*

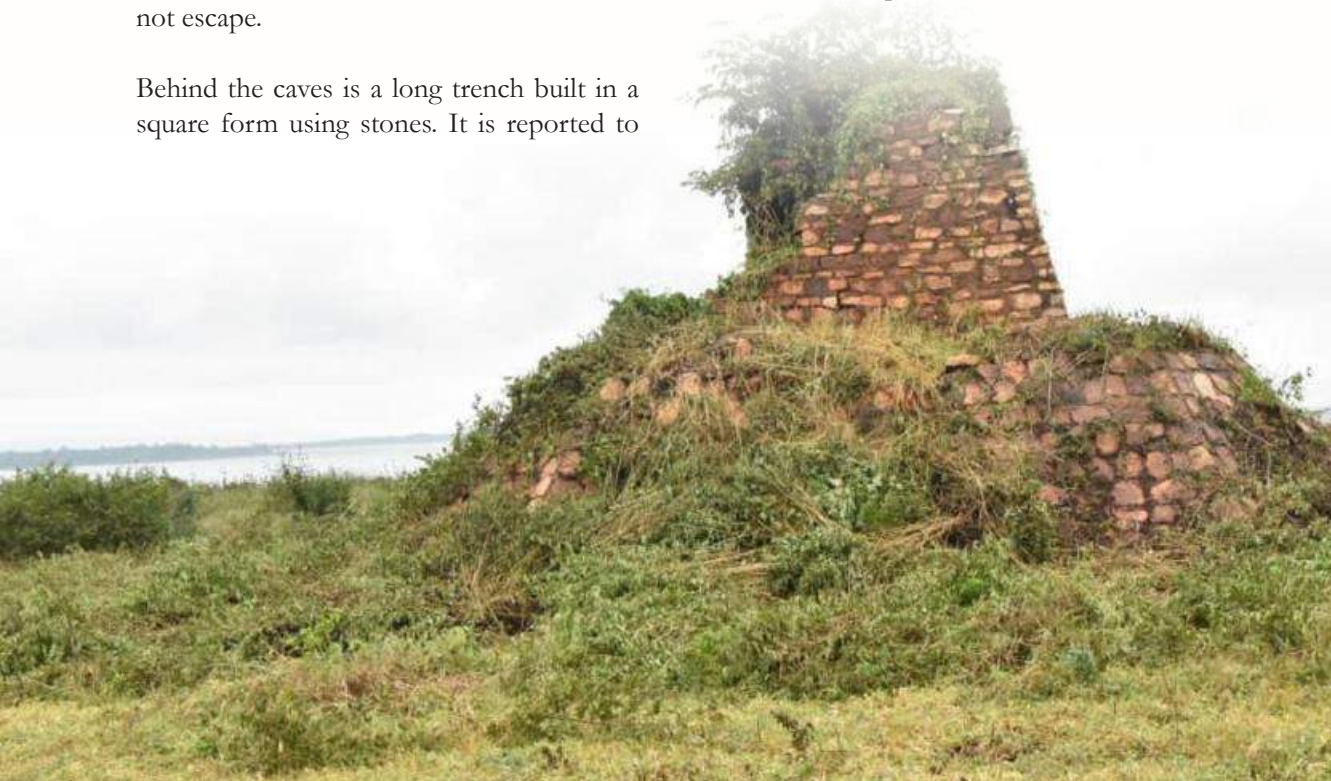
The gazetting of Bukaleba was a blessing in disguise for heritage preservation. Traces of early settlements and movements are thus still evident in the area. Importantly, what is known as the Fort Luba/Fort Thurston memorial site serves as one of the only remaining evidence of slavery in Uganda. This site was an important staging post for slaves being taken from Uganda to the south of Lake Victoria and, for some, onwards to the East Africa coast and Zanzibar.

Located in Walumbe village, Bukatube sub-county in Mayuge district, the site comprises of six caves on the banks of Lake Victoria. The caves are reported to have been used by armed guards who kept a watch over the lake for potential enemies who would steal their human merchandise, watch over the arriving ships from Mwanza in Tanzania and Kisumu in Kenya, but also make sure that slaves did not escape.

Behind the caves is a long trench built in a square form using stones. It is reported to

have served as the slave holding dungeon, before the slaves were loaded onto the ships. There is also a stone tower, a pyramid-like structure. It is reported by the locals that it served as the “control tower” for the ships, others say it was built in memory of Major Thurston. Hence the name Fort Thurston though the locals prefer to refer to the site as Fort Luba in memory of Chief Nyago-Zigombye-Luba. The watch tower had fallen but was restored in 2021 by the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities with financial support from the US Ambassadors’s Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP).

About 200 meters away from Fort Luba/Fort Thurston, a sacred tree is reported by the locals to have been used by Ugandans and later the British for prayers. For the African, this tree is the home to the spirit of the first man to settle in the area, called Walumbe, from which the village gets its name. In the local Lusoga language, Walumbe also loosely translates as the ‘place of death’.



*The watch tower before restoration*

## *Threats to the site – climate change*

The Fort Luba/Fort Thurston memorial site is under threat from climate change. The rising waters of Lake Victoria threaten to wash over the caves. Already, a platform (built with rocks excavated from the caves) used for loading the slaves onto the ships is submerged.

The rise in the water level is attributed to changes in weather patterns. A recent study revealed that the water level in Lake Victoria, which is the main source of water for the Nile in Uganda, had overtaken its normal long-term average and is projected to increase for the next ten years. This is because of the persistent presence of a rainfall belt over the East Africa region, associated with a high-pressure area over the Indian Ocean and an influx of moisture-laden winds from the Atlantic Ocean and the Congo forests. This is aggravated by the effects of the Rwenzori mountains' receding glaciers, which are projected by a 2010 UNESCO study to disappear in the next two to three decades.

“There are cracks that have developed in the caves, signifying that they are about to collapse,” says Sulait Maganda, a resident of Walumbe. According to Samuel Dhikusooka, another resident of Walumbe, the trench that used to be more than 30 meters deep is also affected by continuous erosion because of the loss of vegetation cover resulting from opening of the land for agricultural purposes.





*Human activity at the Bukaleba site*

## Conclusion

While this paper reminds us of the existence of the slave trade in the East African interior, it also shows that there is still surviving evidence – such as Fort Luba/Fort Thurston memorial site – of the once widespread practice in the interior of East Africa.

“We need support to safeguard this site so that even our grandchildren can study about the slave trade,” says Maganda. Protecting the remaining site associated with slavery in Uganda from the effects of climate change indeed offers an opportunity to highlight an important but neglected dimension of the country’s history.

There is a need to undertake further research and documentation of the site, including an archaeological study of the area. This is on top of constructing a retaining wall (using stones in gabions) to safeguard the caves from the rising water levels of Lake Victoria, and increasing the vegetation cover of the site by planting indigenous trees and deep-rooted grass to safeguard the ditch that used to serve as the slave holding chambers.





*Tree used as a prayer site*

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For more information, contact



Off Bativa Road, Makerere,  
P.O. Box 25517, Kampala  
Tel +256 393 294675 / 7  
[ccfu@crossculturalfoundation.or.ug](mailto:ccfu@crossculturalfoundation.or.ug)  
[www.crossculturalfoundation.or.ug](http://www.crossculturalfoundation.or.ug)