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History from the Healer's Shrine: Genre, Historical Imagination, and Early Ganda History

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Recent interpretations of oral histories in Africa have been based increasingly on the premise that each teller creates a unique oral text. Oral sources, according to this new formulation, should not be “flattened by transcription,” with individual voices operating interchangeably.¹ Rather, these sources should be heard with all of the personal, subjective, ambiguous, and contradictory inflections with which they circulate in practice.² This emphasis on multiplicity, variability, and subjectivity represents a notable departure from earlier approaches to oral history that privileged “tradition” as a distinctive cultural form and, following a meticulous methodology pioneered by Jan Vansina,

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¹ Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 23.

² Among others, see Leroy Vail and Landeg White, *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991); Karen Barber, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991); Belinda Bozzoli and Mmantho Nkotsae, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900–1983* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991); Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon*; Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); Abdullahi A. Ibrahim, “The Birth of the Interview: The Thin and the Fat of It,” in Luise White, Stephan F. Miescher, and David William Cohen, eds., *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 103–24; Barbara M. Cooper, “Oral Sources and the Challenges of African History,” in John Edward Philips, ed., *Writing African History* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 191–215; Tamara Giles-Vernick, *Cutting the Vines of the Past: Environmental Histories of the Central African Rain Forest* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

sought to sift their stable and verifiable elements from the flux of performances.³ Perspective and performance, once considered antithetical to the pursuits of professional historians working with oral sources, now occupy a privileged position in the analytical framework.

The growing body of literature that has accompanied this theoretical shift urges historians to recognize the institutional structures in which Africans crafted their histories and to adopt often-unfamiliar epistemologies.⁴ The potential of such an approach for understanding the past lies in the perhaps not so surprising discovery that the truth regimes that operate in these institutional structures often do not have an equivalent in Western epistemologies about what constitutes ‘history.’ Or to rephrase the matter slightly, these truth regimes, like their Western counterparts, are consistently under construction. But rather than serving as an obstacle to historical analysis, recognizing how regimes of truth shape the meanings listeners or readers attach to texts unveils previously hidden aspects of the past.

This reconfiguration of the premises under-girding the interpretation of oral sources has opened up a host of new possibilities for “find[ing] accuracy in unexpected places.”⁵ Vampire stories, paintings, and life histories, as much as formalized poetic traditions and rehearsed oral epics, now serve as the focus of investigations into African pasts.⁶ The scholarship that has resulted from this shift in focus has provided critical theoretical and methodological insights. We have learned, among other things, the value of arguing with informants, the significance of non-narrative modes of organizing memories, and the importance of setting and audience in the meaning-making process. Perhaps most importantly, this body of work has implored us, drawing on the words of Johannes Fabian, to “confront other searches for truth and reality” and to

³ Vansina first laid out his methodology for the collection and treatment of oral traditions in Jan Vansina, *De la tradition orale: Essai de methode historique* (Tervuren: MRAC, 1961), which appeared in English translation as *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, H. M. Wright, trans. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965). Vansina later revised his method in *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

⁴ Thomas Spear, “Oral Tradition: Whose History?” *History in Africa* 8 (1981): 132–48; Renee Louise Tantal, “The Early History of Kitara in Western Uganda: Process Models of Religious and Political Change,” Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1989; David William Cohen and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo, *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989).

⁵ White, *Speaking with Vampires*, 53.

⁶ For vampire stories, see White, *Speaking with Vampires*. For an illuminating examination of the Congolese artist Tshibumba Kanda Matulu’s painted narrative of Zaire, see Johannes Fabian, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996). For life histories as a vantage point from which to approach larger historical issues, see, among others, Marcia Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women: Life-Stories from East/Central Africa* (New York: L. Barber, 1993); Charles Van Onselen, *The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, A South African Sharecropper, 1894–1985* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996); Jean Davison with the women of Mutira, *Voices from Mutira: Change in the Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women, 1910–1995* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996).

“experience all these *representations* of reality as *realities*.”⁷ Those who have taken Fabian’s call seriously have produced works that have greatly enriched our understanding of Africa’s multivocal pasts.

Despite yielding remarkably rich theoretical and substantive insights, however, the sustained challenge over the past fifteen years to previous approaches to oral history has in many respects resulted in a methodological impasse. Perhaps not surprisingly, the recent focus in oral historical research on subjectivities, personal recollections, rumor, and interpretive practices has coincided with a focus on Africa’s most recent pasts.⁸ Because historians who employed African oral “traditions” in writing African history focused on the precolonial period, the move away from the study of oral “traditions” and its accompanying method appears to have coincided with a move away from using oral sources to write early African history.⁹

In many regards, these simultaneous moves represent as much the result of shifting theoretical orientations and topics of scholarly interest as the outcome of methodological disagreements. Lost in much of the debate between the advocates of recent approaches to oral history and scholars who study oral “traditions” are the differences in the types of materials employed in their respective works and the potential of these materials as historical sources. For instance, Luise White describes her concern with rumors about bloodsucking vampires in colonial East Africa as resulting from her interest “not in what happened in Uganda or Kenya but in something that never happened.”¹⁰ But can we extend the same luxury to Vansina, for example, in his efforts to write the eighteenth-century history of the Kuba kingdom in central Africa?¹¹ White can adopt this analytical stance because she has many other sources with which to create the historical canvas that allows her to make sense of the fantastic stories that constitute the focus of her research. For Vansina, however, oral narratives such as those informing his history of the Kuba kingdom serve as much as a means for creating the historical canvas itself as a source for uncovering new perspectives onto the past. In short, the sorts of methodological interrogations called for in the fascinating work on rumor, gossip, and personal narratives produced over the past fifteen years do not fully account for the differing nature of the challenges—both methodological and theoretical—involved in writing histories of Africa in the eighteenth as opposed to

⁷ Fabian, *Remembering the Present*, 297–98.

⁸ See, for example, the contributions to White, Miescher, and Cohen, eds., *African Words, African Voices*.

⁹ David L. Schoenbrun makes a similar point in his review of Christopher Wrigley’s *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty*, in “Myth’s History or History’s Myth: Christopher Wrigley and the History of Obuganda,” *Azania* 34 (1999): 123–33.

¹⁰ Luise White, “True Stories: Narrative, Event, History, and Blood in the Lake Victoria Basin,” in White, Miescher, and Cohen, eds., *African Words, African Voices*, 281.

¹¹ Jan Vansina, *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

the twentieth century. The revealing worlds opened up by the “undefining” of oral tradition, in other words, seem to have a limited time depth.¹²

Yet need this be the case? Has the theoretical shift in the interpretation of oral sources rendered their use impossible for writing early African history? Can the valuable insights derived from this new body of literature on oral history practices be applied to oral narratives that in their early-twentieth-century publications or current circulation are ostensibly neither personal recollections nor reflections on relatively recent happenings? This essay offers a way of bridging recent approaches to oral history in Africa with an earlier set of concerns surrounding oral “traditions” and the use of oral sources for writing histories of considerably earlier periods. As I illustrate in my interpretation of one of the foundational narratives from Buganda, a kingdom located on the northwest shores of Lake Victoria in present-day Uganda, the insights yielded by innovative approaches to the study of oral sources over the past fifteen years need not only apply to twentieth-century topics of analysis. The sensitivity toward genre, the focus on how different regimes of truth shape the content of stories, and the attention to the significance of sites of recollection displayed in recent work can also enhance the analysis of oral sources that claim to describe developments in the distant past. An interest in early African history, in other words, need not entail a re-adoption of the notion of fixed, stable, and bound “traditions.”

By examining the relationship between *where* listeners engage with a story and *what* they hear, this essay offers insight into how the healer’s shrine served as a prominent, and perhaps even the oldest, locale for generating the content and meaning of stories about Kintu, the purported founder of the Ganda kingdom.¹³ Most interpretations of these stories portray Kintu as a conqueror king (or, in some cases, as a “condensed personification” of a series of conquerors) who defeated a number of petty kings on his way toward establishing Buganda as a kingdom. By focusing on the shrine setting and the consequences of listening to stories about Kintu in a place of healing, we can move beyond these conventional analyses and open up previously overlooked avenues of interpretation. The impact of colonial policies aimed at eradicating what colonial officials viewed as irrational practices meant that particular locales, such as healers’ shrines, suffered significant setbacks as sites of recollection during the colonial period while others, such as missionary schools, emerged. Recognizing these colonial and postcolonial realities allows us to see why particular

¹² David William Cohen, “The Undefining of Oral Tradition,” *Ethnohistory* 36, 1 (1989): 9–18.

¹³ There are three main narratives in which Kintu serves as one of the primary characters: “Kintu and Bemba the Snake,” “Kintu and Nambi,” and “Kintu and Kisolo.” Though not necessarily treated by either Ganda or outside scholars as individual elements of a single set of ideas, these three narratives constitute what I call the “Kintu Episode” in Ganda traditions. This essay focuses on the first of these narratives—“Kintu and Bemba the Snake.” For an analysis of the other two narratives, see Neil Kodesh, “Beyond the Royal Gaze: Clanship and Collective Well-Being in Buganda,” Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2004, ch. 1.

interpretations, and the sites of recollection in which they circulated, became dominant on the public level while others became less visible (or audible), yet did not wholly disappear.

Revisiting (both literally and figuratively) some of these previously vigorous arenas of circulation and imagining how they might have functioned in the past as sites of production yields new insights into precolonial history. In the case of Buganda, this interpretive technique reveals the intimate interplay between healing and politics in the distant Ganda past. When viewed with sensitivity toward their circulation and meaning in shrine settings, narratives about Kintu capture a series of momentous developments in the realm of public healing and the expansion of political scale in the several centuries preceding the development of the Ganda kingdom in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. During this period, efforts to establish control over the collective conditions of health characterized the very nature of political practices. Public healers, in short, operated as political leaders, and healers' shrines emerged as sites of creative ambition where aspiring leaders fused ritual and political power and where they composed stories to explain the nature of their authority.

Researching and writing precolonial East African history presents a methodological challenge. The first written sources for most places in the interior do not surface until after the mid-nineteenth century. In the case of Buganda, the earliest documented description of the kingdom appeared in the British explorer John Hanning Speke's *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* in 1863.¹⁴ For historians used to working largely with documentary evidence, unearthing and examining the history of this region prior to the mid-nineteenth century may therefore look like an unfamiliar and perhaps daunting task. Scholars of precolonial East Africa confront this challenge by employing a diverse methodology that draws upon a variety of sources and disciplines. Historians compose narratives for the distant East African past based on evidence gleaned from oral traditions, historical linguistics, archaeology, and comparative ethnography. They place these different forms of evidence side by side in the hopes of perceiving various correlations, convergences, and divergences.

A critical approach to such interdisciplinary scholarship requires that scholars recognize and respect both the benefits and limitations of disciplinary concerns. Archaeological evidence, for instance, provides information about such things as technological change and material culture, but we can seldom comment on the cultural meanings associated with excavated materials without careful recourse to the ethnographic record. Similarly, oral traditions

¹⁴ Speke's account was based on his six-month tenure at the royal court in 1862. John Hanning Speke, *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1863).

provide a finer resolution and a more textured description of processes deduced from archaeological and linguistic evidence, but they rarely provide any sort of reliable chronological anchor. For this we must turn to archaeological and historical linguistic evidence. The sorts of time frames and chronologies informing narratives supported by these types of evidence, however, must necessarily differ from those based on documentary sources. Studies of precolonial East Africa cover what for non-Africanists may seem like unusually expansive and sometimes vaguely defined periods. Moreover, these narratives often do not include individual historical actors. Instead, they rely on units of agency such as “Ganda speakers” and “clans” or on composite images of persons or groups. The content and composition of precolonial East African historical narratives therefore differs in significant ways from those focused on places and periods for which we have a richer documentary source base.

This essay examines one of the main oral traditions surrounding Kintu, the purported founder of the kingdom of Buganda. The first published version of “Kintu and Bemba the Snake” appeared in 1901 in the Ganda Prime Minister Apolo Kagwa’s dynastic history, *Bakabaka b’e Buganda* (The Kings of Buganda).¹⁵ The colonial administrator J. F. Cunningham’s account followed four years later,¹⁶ and over the next few decades several versions of the narrative appeared in the Luganda-language Catholic missionary newspaper *Munno*,¹⁷ various clan histories,¹⁸ and historical treatises written by Ganda intellectuals.¹⁹ These renditions and their accompanying commentaries generated a considerable amount of debate amongst the first generation of literate Ganda concerning proper historical practices. Ganda intellectuals often included “Kintu and Bemba the Snake” and similar types of narratives in their presentations of the Ganda past. But with the gradual emergence during the early colonial period of a discursive universe shared by Ganda intellectuals, colonial officials, and European missionaries, these stories were either relegated to the category of ‘fable’ (*olguero*) or transformed into narratives that meshed with recently introduced European discursive constructs. In a much broader sense, then, the transformation of “Kintu and Bemba the Snake” from a ‘tradition’ to

¹⁵ Apolo Kagwa, *Bakabaka b’e Buganda*, 1st ed. (Kampala: Uganda Bookshop, 1901), 3–4.

¹⁶ J. F. Cunningham, *Uganda and Its Peoples* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1905), 170–78.

¹⁷ “Kintu Ne Bemba,” *Munno* (1915): 93–95; Daudi Bakika and J. Bwagu, “Ekika Kye Balangira Mu Buganda,” *Munno* (1921): 73; and Lawi Wakibi Sekiti, “The Baganda of Mbale [Mbaale]” and Ludoviko Kibato, “The Harp of the King of Buganda,” both in *Translations from Munno and other Periodicals*, Sir John Gray’s Manuscripts, Royal Commonwealth Society.

¹⁸ Eriya M. Buligwanga, *Ekitabo Ekitegeza Ekika Kye Mamba* (Kampala: Uganda Publishing Company, 1916), 14–17; S. K. L. Kakoma, A. M. Ntate, and M. Serukaga, *Ekitabo Eky’Abanyajove Ab’e Mmamba Mu Siiga Lya Nankere e’ Bukerekere* (Kampala: East African Institute of Social Research, 1959), 3–4.

¹⁹ James Miti, “A Short History of Buganda, Bunyoro, Busoga, Toro, and Ankole,” MS Translation (Makerere University Library, n.d.), 15–17; Nsimbi, *Amannya Amaganda N’Ennono Zaago* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1956), 184–85; Charles E. S. Kaguba, “The Genealogy of Kabaka Kintu and the Early Bakabaka of Buganda,” *Uganda Journal* 27, 2 (1963): 207–8.

a text that then circulated as 'history' encapsulated the challenges elite Ganda faced in coming to terms with a rapidly changing world.²⁰

The literate Ganda who published and argued over the significance of the Kintu narratives in the early colonial period were recent converts to Christianity, government clerks, and active politicians. Similarly, the Ganda intellectuals with whom I engaged in conversations about Kintu included practicing Christians and devout Muslims who had made pilgrimage to Mecca. Some of their narrations included the residue of unmistakably recent discursive developments, included feedback from Ganda histories published in Luganda, and were embroiled in ongoing current disputes. Much of what they narrated did not differ, at least in formal content, from the accounts recorded in the early and mid-twentieth century. Yet these narrators also serviced their communities as healers, and their observations and comments prompted new avenues of interpretation.

Listening to narratives about Kintu in healers' shrines provided insight into the overlapping contexts in which Ganda heard these traditions. This in turn opened up the possibility of imagining how these narratives might have been understood in similar settings in the distant past. In this essay, I draw upon evidence from historical linguistics, early ethnographic writings, my conversations with Ganda healers, and other scholarly works to present an interpretation of how an audience seated at a shrine might have consumed the "Kintu and Bemba the Snake" narrative in the distant past. Such an endeavor necessarily requires exercising our historical imagination. But it is an imagination that reflects regional sensitivities and whose contents and contours derive from evidence generated by historical linguistics and comparative ethnography. By historicizing and contextualizing our historical imagination, in other words, we can infer possible ranges of understanding from a limited set of conceptual tools that can be reconstructed to the time and place in which people listened to stories such as "Kintu and Bemba the Snake."

In the case of Kintu, this interpretive technique suggests how the Ganda narratives surrounding this well-known figure depict the concerted efforts of political leaders to reconfigure the boundaries of public healing. Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, ambitious leaders inaugurated an intellectual innovation that allowed for the portability of previously territorial spirits. The concept of spiritual portability allowed initiated spirit mediums to transport spirits from one place to another. This process extended the territorial range over which a particular spirit and its earthly representatives might ensure collective prosperity and prompted a series of social transformations that expanded the scale of political endeavors in the area that would eventually become Buganda.

²⁰ For a detailed historiographic overview of the "Kintu and Bemba the Snake" narrative, see Kodesh, "Beyond the Royal Gaze," 37–56.

The sorts of public healing practices situated at the core of my analysis often surface in scholarly analyses under the rubric of “religion.” The use of the concept of religion to describe this complex cluster of activities, however, poses particular problems for understanding the historical significance of East African healing practices. The term “religion” represents as much an act of interpretation as translation, the bestowal of which constituted a classic part of the colonization process.²¹ As Anthony Appiah has commented, the differences between the Western concept of religion and African practices usually conceived as religious means that “to report [these practices] in Western categories is as much to invite misunderstanding as to offer insight.”²² The problem with the term lies in its inability to capture the extent to which the various activities and philosophies grouped under this analytic umbrella once informed practices that most historians would not regard as religious in nature. Abstracted from their social and historical contexts, the practices usually catalogued as “religious” serve as expressions of “faith” and “belief.” As Steven Feierman has noted in his discussion of Nyabingi mediumship in southwestern Uganda and northern Rwanda, however, the religion metaphor proves inadequate because “[Nyabingi] mediumship was a form of practical reason, and only rarely do historians speak of religion in these terms... Mediums and their followers were concerned not with expressing belief but rather with reorienting their situation in the world for practical ends—to cure the sick and to bring an end to famine and epidemic diseases.”²³

Ideas about health and prosperity went hand in hand in the distant Ganda past. Healers maintained the social order and established the conditions in which communities could pursue collective well-being. The domains of public healing and politics were intimately entwined in practical ways, and treating Ganda healing practices as forms of religious expression therefore often results in misguided and misleading historical interpretations. For example, historians of Buganda who employ this analytical approach tend to treat healers as the analogue of clergymen in the familiar European struggle between church and state.²⁴ This metaphor, however, relies on a religion-state

²¹ For an excellent discussion of the problems with the concept of “religion” in an African context, see Paul Landau, “‘Religion’ and Conversion in African History: A New Model,” *Journal of Religious History*, 23, 1 (1999): 8–30. See also Rosalind Shaw, “The Invention of ‘African Traditional Religion,’” *Religion* 20 (1990): 339–53.

²² Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 108.

²³ Steven Feierman, “Colonizers, Colonized, and the Creation of Invisible Histories,” in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Linguistic Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 202–3.

²⁴ See, for example, F. B. Welbourn, “Some Aspects of Kiganda Religion,” *Uganda Journal* 26, 2 (1962): 171–82; Holger Bernt Hansen, “The Colonial Control of Spirit Cults in Uganda,” in David M. Anderson and Douglas H. Johnson, eds., *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in East African History* (London: James Currey, 1995), 143–63; and, more recently, Henri Medard’s Ph.D. dissertation, specifically the sections entitled “La religion méconnue du Buganda” and

dichotomy that cannot capture the nature and significance of public healing in the distant Ganda past. In the period preceding the emergence of the centralized Ganda kingdom in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the discourse and practices of public healing—the debates surrounding the efficacy of a particular spiritual force or therapeutic procedure in enhancing collective well-being, ensuring fertility, or combating illness—stood at the heart of political activities. In order to recognize public healing as a critical element in the development of complex communities in the distant Ganda past, then, we must recognize that public healers acted as political leaders who sought to preserve and maintain the conditions in which communities could prosper.

KINTU AND BEMBA THE SNAKE

One of the best known oral traditions in Buganda concerns the confrontation between Kintu, the purported founder of the kingdom, and a tyrannical ruler named Bemba the Snake. The following presentation of “Kintu and Bemba the Snake” draws on several published versions of the narrative.²⁵

Bemba Omusota (Bemba the Snake)²⁶ ruled Buganda prior to Kintu's arrival in the country. He resided at Buddo hill, which was then called Naggalabi hill, from where he plundered his own subjects and caused the deaths of many people. Bemba's tyrannical nature even led him to kill the son of his prime minister (*Katikkiro*) Mukiibi,²⁷ the head of the Pangolin clan, forcing him to flee the country along with his other sons. While in exile, Mukiibi met Kintu at Mangira in Kyaggwe, where he offered to assist him in overthrowing Bemba and volunteered the services of two of his men—Nfudu (Tortoise) and Kigave (Pangolin).²⁸ Upon completing their meeting, Kintu, Mukiibi, Kigave, and Nfudu traveled together with the people of Mangira to Bukesa, where Kigave and his assistant Nfudu set up a base from which to attack Bemba. One day Nfudu and Kigave visited Bemba's palace disguised as visitors. After spending a few days there, they told Bemba that people of high respect did not sleep with their heads intact and that he should take off his head at night as they did at their homes. Kigave

“Royauté et religion: Complémentarités et concurrences.” Henri Medard, “Croissance et crises de la royauté du Buganda au XIX^e Siècle,” these de doctorat (Université Paris I—Pantheon Sorbonne, 2001).

²⁵ Apolo Kagwa, *The Kings of Buganda*, translated by M. S. M Kiwanuka (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971), 5–7; Cunningham, *Uganda and Its Peoples*, 170–78; Apolo Kagwa, “Ekitabo Kye Kika Kyenseeneene” (Privately printed on author's press, n.d.), 40–41; C. W. Hattersley, *An English Boy's Life and Adventures in Uganda* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1913), 72–74; Bakika and Bwagu, “Ekika Kye Balangira,” 62–63; John M. K. Bapere, “Kintu and the People with Him on Masaba Hill,” *Munno* (1929): 66–69, in *Source Material in Uganda History*, Vol. 3. Collected and translated by the Department of History, Makerere University, 1971; Kibato, “The Harp of the King of Buganda”; Nsimbi, *Amannya Amaganda*, 183–85; Kakoma, Ntate, and Serukaga, *Ekitabo Eky'Abakyanjove*, 3–4.

²⁶ Bemba often appears specifically as a python (*timba*).

²⁷ In some versions the Mukiibi character appears as Nduwga, the title used for the head of the Pangolin clan.

²⁸ In some versions Kigave appears as Lugave, the Luganda word for ‘pangolin.’ The word *kigave*, however, carries the same meaning.

demonstrated what they meant by pointing to his friend Nfudu, whose head had disappeared into his shell. The following evening Bemba asked his guests to cut off his head so that he could sleep with a lot of respect just like them.²⁹ Nfudu and Kigave then chopped off Bemba's head and carried it to Kintu, who became the *kabaka* (king) of Buganda.

Most accounts of "Kintu and Bemba the Snake" relate how upon overcoming Bemba, Kintu embarked on a journey through a series of places before eventually reaching Magonga in Busujju, where he settled and established his capital. After many years of residence at Magonga, Buganda's founding hero eventually disappeared following an altercation with the founder of the Otter clan. But his spirit and the memory of his accomplishments endured through acts of commemoration performed at his royal tomb at Nnono, Magonga, tended to by a priest from the Leopard clan.

This image of Kintu as a wandering conqueror-king dominates the master narrative running through most written versions of Ganda history.³⁰ In many respects, a sense of inevitability often pervades these discussions of Kintu's exploits. Because Buganda eventually emerged as a centralized kingdom, scholars have been tempted to view the narratives surrounding its purported founder as necessarily describing the beginnings of this centralizing process. A careful probing of recollections about Kintu that weave in and out of this dominant trajectory, however, suggests that Kintu may not always have been regarded in this manner and that, when he was, such a view was not the only one circulating with force. As a prominent healer in the Colobus Monkey clan explained, there were two different Kintus: one who vanished and one who produced Chwa Nabakka, who succeeded his father Kintu as king.³¹ In so doing, he sought to direct attention to two distinct yet layered aspects of Kintu's persona. Recollections of Kintu having disappeared hint at an alternative conception of the most prominent figure in Ganda history, a conception not of the "first king to rule people," as one local historian explained, but of a powerful spiritual force.³²

Descriptions of Kintu as a spiritual entity surfaced numerous times over the course of my conversations in Buganda, most often in shrine settings during discussions with healers who practice their profession through spirit possession. My purpose in pointing to these alternative conceptions lies not in raising issues surrounding authenticity and veracity. Rather, I want to suggest that these variants provide insightful clues about an alternative arena—the healer's shrine—in which stories about Kintu once lived and

²⁹ The details of this portion of the narrative differ in some versions, but always with the same result: Nfudu and Kigave trick Bemba into having his head chopped off.

³⁰ For the historiography of the Kintu figure, see Kodesh, "Beyond the Royal Gaze," 37–56.

³¹ Kalule George William, 29 Sept. 2001.

³² Ssalongo Ssegujja Musisi, 16 Mar. 2002.

circulated on a scale considerably larger than they do today. If Ganda healers suggest that there were two sorts of Kintus, then understanding the significance of each requires us to imagine how different audiences at different locations might have consumed the narratives surrounding the Kintu persona. Such an exercise in historical imagination necessarily entails recognizing how historical actors exercised claims to truth quite different from those made by professional guilded historians. The first Kintu—the one who founded a royal dynasty and produced a successor to his throne—circulates within a familiar generic framework and has therefore figured prominently in Ganda historiography. The second Kintu occupies less familiar, less visible terrain and has barely made an appearance. The remainder of this essay seeks to redress this imbalance and, in so doing, to suggest a framework for a reanalysis of early Ganda history. In this respect, three aspects of the Kintu conquest story deserve particular attention: Kintu's appearance in the broader regional setting; Bemba's portrayal as a snake, often as a python; and the role of the Mukiibi, Kigave, and Nfudu characters.

KINTU: THE REGIONAL SETTING

While the image of Kintu the conqueror-king dominates historians' accounts of Buganda's origins, the Kintu figure circulates in a broader regional context that extends beyond the borders of Buganda. The derivation of the name 'Kintu,' in fact, suggests a far more humble and familiar origin for Buganda's founding hero than that found in Ganda dynastic narratives. Consisting of the prefix *ki* and root *-ntu* ('person'), Kintu designates the "Big Person," an honorific title that may once have served as a generic designation for every prominent founder of a clan, lineage, or some other social collectivity. In this regard, there were many different Kintus, or "Big People," in the region prior to the collapsing of these personages into the Kintu-as-dynastic-founder figure in Buganda. The transition from Kintu the generic "Big Person" to Kintu the dynastic founder, however, did not occur throughout the region, and a brief examination of the Kintu character in the histories of the Soga polities to the east of Buganda illuminates regional transformations in the character's significance and function.

As part of the process of clan formation in Busoga, Soga created a specific category of spirits designed to perpetuate the memories of the eponymous founders of Busoga's numerous clans. Known as *nkuni*, these spirits resided in areas where a particular clan first settled or arrived in Busoga and presided over the community's continued well-being. Clan members consulted *nkuni* and made offerings at the *nkuni* shrines located on these original settlements. These activities granted first-comer status and the entitlements that accompanied such a distinction to participating clan members. However, while *nkuni* sites anchored a clan's discursive and ritual acts in a primary geographical location, clan members could carry

their *nkuni* with them as they moved into new areas and established new settlements.³³

In Busoga, some *nkuni* spirits achieved a more prominent position than others and “were often associated with such important forces as fertility and death, and such important events as birth and marriage.” Soga referred to these spirits as *misambwa* (sing. *musambwa*), of which Kintu proved the most revered in southern Busoga. In most parts of the Great Lakes region, *misambwa* referred to a category of territorial spirits that manifested themselves as wild animals—usually leopards, snakes, and crocodiles—and resided in features of the natural environment such as trees, rivers, hills, and stones. In his examination of early Soga history, David Cohen noted that in addition to *misambwa* such as Kintu there were also in Busoga “older *misambwa*” that resembled those described above. Shrines at which people made offerings and sought assistance by consulting the *musambwa* Kintu through the services of a medium appeared throughout southern Busoga, where people also planted a tree in honor of the powerful spiritual force before erecting a new house.³⁴ In southern Busoga, then, Kintu appears to have undergone a transformation from a *nkuni*—a spiritual force designed to perpetuate the memory of a clan’s founding “Big Person,” to a *musambwa*—a more wide-ranging spiritual entity associated with a category of experience (fertility, death, etc.) or a particular territory.³⁵

The meanings attached to the Kintu figure in southern Busoga shed light on Kintu’s significance in Buganda prior to his transformation into dynastic founder. Ganda legitimate and perpetuate the memories of notable historical figures and spirits by anchoring them in specific sites of reminiscence embedded in the landscape. Such a place exists for Kintu at Magonga, an area just west of the Mayanja Kato River in Busujju. Situated on the eighteenth-century border with the kingdom of Bunyoro, Magonga lies quite a distance from the fertile lakeshore where Kintu defeated the tyrannical Bemba at Buddo hill in southern Busiro. As a ritual site dedicated to the *musambwa* spirit Kintu, Magonga brought together a complex configuration of communities consisting of ritual specialists, herders, cultivators, and healers.

³³ David William Cohen, *The Historical Tradition of Busoga: Mukama and Kintu* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 19–21, 44–45.

³⁴ Cohen, *Historical Tradition*, 20–21.

³⁵ Soga clan histories suggest a possible connection between the Kintu figure and the leopard totem. In southern Busoga all the groups of people who adopted the leopard as their totem trace their ancestry to Kintu, a possible indication that the *musambwa* may once have functioned as the *nkuni* spirit for these communities. However, it is also quite likely that the connection between the leopard totem and Kintu in southern Busoga occurred after the rise to prominence of Kintu the conqueror-king in Buganda, where the Leopard clan provides the priest for Kintu’s royal tomb at Magonga. For the connection between Kintu and the leopard totem in southern Busoga, see Cohen, *Historical Tradition*, 89, 119.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the activities undertaken at Magonga concerned the number and diversity of participating clans. At least a dozen clans contributed to the ritual center's functioning, some of which later emerged as among the most prominent in the kingdom. These clans established a variety of ritual and discursive connections with Kintu at Magonga. The Frog clan, for example, maintained its principal estate several miles northeast of Magonga at Bukerekere ('Land of the Frogs'), home of its leader Nankere. However, at each new moon the clan's leader and his followers carried their spirits from Bukerekere to Magonga, where they performed a series of rituals at Kintu's shrine. The clan also maintained additional connections to Magonga. The clan's main drum, for instance, was presented to the head of clan after a series of activities beginning at Magonga and ending at Bukerekere. In addition, Kintu's estate at Magonga also housed the Frog clan's horned charm (*jjembe*) Nawanga, whose caretaker carried it to the Kikasa celebrations performed at the clan's main shrine in honor of Mukasa, the powerful spirit associated with Lake Victoria.³⁶

The Frog clan's connections to Magonga illustrate both the ritual center's integrative capacity as well as its links to wider ritual networks. The clan's spiritual home remained at Bukerekere, where clan members gathered at the estate's shrine to honor the *misambwa* spirits that inhabited the area. Yet the clan's ritual tentacles stretched south to Magonga, where Frog clan members participated in ceremonies focused around Kintu's shrine. These ceremonies served as occasions when Frog clan members interacted with groups of people belonging to a number of different clans, which themselves formed part of social and discursive networks reaching in a variety of directions. In this respect, Kintu the *musambwa* spirit did not 'belong' to any particular clan. Mwanje of the Leopard clan, who served as the shrine's main priest, held the most exalted position in the ritual complex at Magonga. But Kintu's life-sustaining capacities resulted from the participation of a number of different groups of people, and Mwanje held but one position, albeit a critical one, in activating Kintu's powers.

In the mid-eighteenth century, leaders of the Leopard clan played a crucial role in the discursive and ritual transformation of Kintu into Buganda's dynastic founder. Their efforts resulted in the establishment of a new royal installation rite at Buddo hill and prompted the incorporation of "Kintu and Bemba the Snake" into the emerging Ganda dynastic narrative. Prior to attaining status as the first Ganda king during this period, however, Kintu the *musambwa* serviced Magonga as a spiritual force toward which communities directed practices designed to ensure continued prosperity and abundance. These communities sought to maintain their well-being by consolidating their intellectual energies and productive capacities around their spiritual patron. They participated in collective ritual practices, such as those that occurred at each new moon, at the

³⁶ Kakoma, Ntate, and Serukaka, *Ekitabo Eky'Abakyanjove*, 2, 14, 21, 37–38.

musambwa Kintu's 'home' at Magonga. But each also formed part of a wider network of alliances that stretched beyond Magonga. Understanding the Kintu figure in this manner opens the door for an alternative reading of "Kintu and Bemba the Snake," and a similar analysis of the Bemba character lends further insight into the shifting political and intellectual environment in which Ganda crafted what would eventually become their kingdom's founding narrative.

BEMBA: PYTHONS, PROSPERITY, AND LAKE VICTORIA

As counterpart to the benevolent protector Kintu, Bemba appears as a tyrannical ruler who plunders his subjects and brings harm to surrounding communities. While this depiction of Bemba dominates all accounts of the Kintu and Bemba narrative, ethnographic evidence from Buganda as well as other areas in the Great Lakes region suggests that Bemba—or the form of authority that he personifies—probably did not always appear in this manner to Ganda historical actors. This evidence hints at how Bemba's despotic characteristics represent the outcome of a struggle that resulted in the reorientation of the healing capacities of particular ritual centers and the spirits associated with them. Before considering this transformation itself, however, we must first examine the nature of the authority that Bemba represents. Two particular features of the Bemba character stand out and warrant further attention: Bemba's appearance as a snake, often times a python; and the location of Bemba's 'capital' at Buddo Hill, close to the shores of Lake Victoria. Taken together, these two features furnish insight into both the type of authority Bemba held over his subjects and the nature of the social and intellectual transformations that his defeat entailed.

In their efforts to promote and maintain social health and continued prosperity, the communities living along the western shores of Lake Victoria between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries drew upon an ancient intellectual tradition inherited from their distant ancestors. For Ganda communities, these collective endeavors included the practice of directing acts of sacrifice and dedication to territorially based spirits known as *misambwa*. These spirits resided in features of the natural environment and presided over the success of fishing, hunting, and farming endeavors. *Misambwa* spirits oversaw these activities in localities occupied by several lineages. However, particular lineages or families—those designated as having been the first to arrive in the area—maintained authority over these local spirits. These lineages displayed their status as first-comers in ritual settings by providing the priests or mediums at important *misambwa* shrines and by coordinating acts of sacrifice and dedication to *misambwa* on behalf of all in the community.³⁷

³⁷ For a more detailed discussion of shifts in the deeply-rooted traditions of health and healing in the region, see David Lee Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1998), 197–203.

Ethnographers working in the Great Lakes region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries noted how *misambwa* spirits frequently manifested themselves as snakes, most often as pythons.³⁸ These early ethnographers also observed how the lineages or families who directed acts of sacrifice and dedication toward *misambwa* spirits often performed these rites at locations where powerful pythons dwelt. The missionary-ethnographer John Roscoe provided perhaps the best account of these practices in his early-twentieth-century observations of the activities undertaken at Bulonge, a locality near the shores of Lake Victoria in Buddu. Roscoe described a series of activities focused around a shrine located in a forest on the shores of Lake Victoria near the banks of the Mujuzi River. Members of the Heart clan cultivated the areas surrounding the shrine and provided its priest, a hereditary office within the clan occupied by the estate's principal caretaker. In addition to his role in the area's ritual activities, the estate's caretaker was also responsible for the shrine's maintenance. On one side of the shrine's interior stood the python Sserwanga's resting place and that of his guardian, while the other side included a sleeping area for the medium and his assistant, both of whom lived at the shrine.

Ritual practices directed towards the python Sserwanga at Bulonge sought to ensure the well-being and prosperity of the entire community as well as that of its individual members. Fishermen requested success in their expeditions, while newly married men desiring children or those whose wives had not yet produced any also sought the python's blessing. Sserwanga's ability to secure abundance for its devotees, however, relied on rituals carried out on behalf of the community by the shrine's medium and priest. These rituals occurred at the appearance of a new moon, and Roscoe's account deserves a rather lengthy quotation:

For several days before the moon became visible the people made preparations because there was no work allowed to be done on the estate for seven days. Directly after the new moon appeared the drums were beaten and the people gathered for the worship; those who had requests to make brought offerings for the god; they were chiefly beer, cowrie shells, and a few goats and fowls. The priest always came with a large following of smaller chiefs. The priesthood was hereditary, and the holder of it was always the chief of the estate. When the priest had received the offerings from the people and told the python what had been brought and the number of requests, he dressed the Medium in the sacred dress ready for the python to take possession of him When the priest had thus dressed the Medium, he gave him a small gourd full of beer to drink, and afterwards some of the milk mixed with the white clay from the python's bowl; the spirit of the python then came upon the man, and he went down on his face and wriggled about upon his stomach like a snake, uttering peculiar noises, and speaking in a tongue which required an interpreter to explain to the

³⁸ Schoenbrun, *Green Place*, 199. The conceptual link between territorial *misambwa* spirits and pythons related to the common practice among pythons of lingering around bodies of water, which for many Great Lakes communities served as conduits to the Underworld where spirits traveled upon the death of their human vehicles.

people. The people stood around and looked on whilst the drums were beaten and the python gave its oracle. The interpreter, named Lukumirizi,³⁹ stood by listening until the Medium had ended his speech; when he finished his talk he fell down like a person in a sound sleep for a long time utterly overcome with his exertions. Lukumirizi the interpreter then explained what had been foretold, and told the fortunate persons whose requests had been granted what they were to do in order to obtain their desire, and what was the medical treatment which the wife was to undergo, &c. This ceremony was repeated each day during the seven days feasting.⁴⁰

Roscoe's description of the ritual activities surrounding the python Sserwanga at Bulonge reveals several crucial features of *misambwa* practices in general and those involving pythons more specifically. The conflation of the offices of priest-interpreter and family head of the estate's principal lineage illustrates the fusion of ritual and political authority that occurred at places of creative power such as Sserwanga's shrine. Roscoe's account also indicates how in addition to the presentation of gifts and the offering of sacrifices, ritual practices surrounding *misambwa* that manifested themselves as pythons also involved the ancient practice of spirit possession known throughout the Great Lakes region as *kubándwa*.⁴¹ Finally, Roscoe's description offers an example of the common association between spiritual entities, pythons, and bodies of water, in this case the Mujuzi River and, by extension, Lake Victoria.

Python centers similar to the one described by Roscoe dotted the shores of Lake Victoria in the distant past. These centers formed part of an intellectual network that elaborated upon the connections between pythons, the life-sustaining qualities of water, and the capacity of water to function as a mediatory substance. An example drawn from the history of the Genet Cat clan in Buganda demonstrates how canoes transported, both in a literal and a metaphorical sense, this complex association of ideas from the Ssesse islands in Lake Victoria to estates on the mainland. According to Genet Cat clan histories, the clan played a crucial role in King Nnakibinge's well-known campaign against the Nyoro, Buganda's western neighbors. As Nnakibinge prepared for his journey to the Ssesse islands to seek assistance in his campaign, a diviner (*mulaguzi*) told the king that when he reached Bussi Island he would hear someone chopping trees in the forest. The diviner explained to the king how this person would ferry him in a canoe first to Zzinga island and then to Bukesa island, where the spirit Wannema would provide him with a brave young man to assist him in his battle against the Nyoro. When Nnakibinge reached Bussi island he heard a man named Nakiiso of the Genet Cat clan

³⁹ In addition to being the head of the estate, the shrine's priest also served as the medium's interpreter. See John Roscoe's account of the same event in *The Baganda: An Account of Their Native Customs and Beliefs* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911), 322.

⁴⁰ John Roscoe, "Python Worship in Uganda," *Man* 9 (1909): 89–90.

⁴¹ The widespread analogy in the Great Lakes region between the manner in which a spirit possesses a person and a python seizes its prey hints at the historical depth of this connection.

chopping wood in the forest, just as the diviner had foretold. The king approached Nakiiso, who as it turned out was constructing a canoe to return to his home on Zzinga island. Nakiiso ferried Nnakibinge to Bukesa island and then back to the mainland in a canoe called Nakawungu (from *okuwunguka*—‘to cross over a body of water, be ferried, transport across a body of water’). As a sign of gratitude for the service he had provided, the king bestowed upon Nakiiso the name Kabazzi (an honorific title derived from the verb *okubajja*—‘to chop into shape, engage in carpentry work’), which came to designate the head of the Genet Cat clan.⁴²

Nakiiso’s canoe Nakawungu eventually achieved prominence as part of the royal naval fleet.⁴³ The name Nakawungu, however, circulates in a different fashion at the Genet Cat clan’s principal estate on the mainland at Kyango in Mawokota. A giant incense tree (*Canarium schweinfurthii*) called Nakawungu stands at the center of the estate and functions as a sacred spiritual site, where individuals seek assistance from the area’s spiritual forces and residents gather to “beat drums and call the spirits.” The tree acquired the name Nakawungu on account of its growing on top of the grave of a powerful woman named Nakawungu, whose ancestral ghost (*muzimu*) became a territorial spirit (*musambwa*) that continues to inhabit the tree and grant the gift of childbirth. One of the tree’s several visible roots resembles Nakawungu’s outspread legs, and there women who have not yet conceived place offerings and make their requests. Some of the other roots resemble snakes, and in the shrine situated close to the tree the *musambwa* Nakawungu manifests herself in the form of a python.⁴⁴ Nakawungu’s spirit also appears at the estate of the Kasendwa sub-branch of the Genet Cat clan, where it resides in a well thought to contain healing substances and serves as the vehicle through which members of patri-lineages “link up to the clan’s spirits.”⁴⁵ Finally, the Genet Cat clan presides over an estate named Nakawungu in coastal Kyaggwe, from where in the past its residents crossed the lake to ‘fetch’ the spirit Mukasa.⁴⁶

Nakawungu’s enduring presence as a spiritual force in the Genet Cat clan provides a telling example of how lacustrine historical actors transported a complex set of ideas relating fertility, pythons, and the powers of Lake Victoria from the Ssesse archipelago to settlements on the mainland. In his examination of the powers associated with Lake Victoria, Michael Kenny noted that the people living around the eastern lakeshores believed their canoes to be inhabited by spirits. These canoe spirits originated in the trees used to construct the canoe’s keel, where the spirits resided, and manifested themselves as pythons to

⁴² Nsimbi, *Amannya Amaganda*, 211; Muyondo Kubi Kiviri, 31 Oct. 2001.

⁴³ Richard Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 244.

⁴⁴ Muyondo Kubi Kiviri, 31 Oct. 2001.

⁴⁵ Haji Blukhan Kabulidde, 3 Nov. 2001.

⁴⁶ Miti, “Short History,” 1606.

receive offerings as directed by the people whom they possessed.⁴⁷ Residents also attached to their canoes “hair” made from the cloth streamers of old canoes in order to create a resemblance to the lake’s giant sea serpents.⁴⁸ Building upon this image and the example from the Genet Cat clan, we can easily imagine a scenario in which residents of lakeside communities, traveling in serpent-like canoes between the Ssesse islands and various points along the lakeshores in the distant past, carried with them critical ideas and practices associating notions of abundance and fertility with spirit possession, pythons, and the powers emanating from the bodies of water in which pythons often dwelt.

In their broadest sense, then, the python centers that dotted the shores of Lake Victoria formed part of an ancient intellectual complex combining the connection between territorial *misambwa* spirits and pythons with spirit possession, fertility, and the mediatory nature of water. Situated in close proximity to Lake Victoria on the Busiro shoreline, Buddo hill—home of the python named Bemba—represented just such a center.⁴⁹ The clanless nature of the kingship in Buganda meant that most dynastic accounts of the Kintu and Bemba narrative depict Bemba as having no clan, so as to avoid associating the kingship with a specific indigenous clan. However, a combination of evidence drawn from clan histories and descriptions of the royal accession rites established at Buddo Hill in the mid-eighteenth century suggests that the Lungfish clan may have presided over a python center there in the distant past.

Among all Ganda clans only the Lungfish clan claims Bemba as one of its ancestors. This claim resonates with the clan’s contributions to the lacustrine cultural complex surrounding the western shores of Lake Victoria.⁵⁰ The Ssesse archipelago formed part of a network of economic relations that included people living on the lakeshores to the west, north, and possibly as far east as Ukerewe.⁵¹ The Lungfish clan played a prominent role in canoe-borne economic activities between the Ssesse islands and coastal Busiro, and clan members presided over a diffuse network of estates along the western lakeshore

⁴⁷ The communities living along the lake’s eastern shores preserved the keel once a canoe fell into a state of disrepair.

⁴⁸ Michael Kenny, “The Powers of Lake Victoria,” *Anthropos* 72, 5/6 (1977): 725–27.

⁴⁹ The Church Missionary Society missionary C. W. Hattersley described Buddo as a place where many snakes dwelt on account of the area’s inhabitants’ fear of killing the creatures. See Hattersley, *An English Boy’s Life*, 74.

⁵⁰ Kawooya Bakazirwendo, 4 Oct. 2001; Committee of the Lungfish Clan, *Ekitabo Ky’Ekika Ky’Emmbama* (Acquired at Lungfish clan introduction ceremony at king’s residence at Banda, 2001), 2; Dick Makande Nsubuga, *Abazzukulu Ba Kkerebwe E Lukumba, Bwerenga Mu Ssiga Lya Kirulu E Bwenga Mu Kika Ky’Emmamba* (Kampala: Luganda Language Society, 1997), 9. Lungfish clan history constitutes a matter of considerable debate, and not all versions claim Bemba as an ancestor.

⁵¹ Reid, *Political Power*, 227–50; Michael Kenny, “The Stranger from the Lake: A Theme in the History of the Lake Victoria Shorelands,” *Azania* 17 (1982): 16–20.

as well as on Lake Victoria's major islands.⁵² Some of these estates functioned as centers of canoe construction, where skilled professionals engaged in the complex craft.⁵³ In addition to playing a major role in lacustrine canoe-building and trading activities, the Lungfish clan also stood at the heart of the region's intellectual and ritual complex. The clan contributed to the administration of the principal shrine dedicated to the lake's primary spiritual force Mukasa. Mukasa's mother, Nambubi Namatimba, reportedly belonged to the Lungfish clan, as did his medium as well as several other prominent individuals with connections to Sseese. In addition, the clan's leader Gabunga served as an intermediary between the king and the spirit Mukasa's representatives.⁵⁴

The royal accession rites instituted at Buddo hill in the mid-eighteenth century ultimately transformed the sacred site from a python center into a venue for the king's inauguration.⁵⁵ Some of the details of these rites, however, contain the residue of the hill's previous existence and further suggest an association with the Lungfish clan. When the king-elect and his entourage arrived at Buddo hill, they were met by the hill's priest, a Lungfish clan member who along with a fellow clan mate served as the hill's guardians. The guardian-priests blocked the king-elect from entering the compound, and after engaging the king's men in a mock battle they permitted the royal entourage to enter the site.⁵⁶ The two guardians then led the prince to a house called Buganda, which was regarded as the former dwelling of Bemba and his predecessors. There the king-elect participated in a series of ceremonies, including one in which he sharpened a brass spear on the living body of a python. He then spent the night in the house before undergoing the remaining ritual activities the following day.⁵⁷

⁵² For the clan's activities in the Buvuma archipelago, see Jurgen Jensen, "Die Erweiterung Des Lungenfischs-Clan in Buganda (Uganda) Durch Den Anschluss von Bavuma Gruppen," *Sociologus* 19, 2 (1969): 153–66. I thank Henri Médard for providing me with a French translation of this article.

⁵³ For canoe construction, see Roscoe, *The Baganda*, 383–90; and Reid, *Political Power*, 228–31.

⁵⁴ Kagwa, *The Customs of the Baganda*, May Mandelbaum, ed., Ernest B. Kalibala, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 114–15; Roscoe, *The Baganda*, 290–94; Nsimbi, *Amannya Amaganda*, 127. This intermediary role was reinforced by the clan's lungfish totem, whose anomalous characteristics seem to have inspired metaphorical associations with the spiritual realm. An air-breathing creature that inhabits the mudflats along the lake and resembles a snake, the lungfish provided oarsmen traveling between spiritual centers on the Sseese islands and lakeshore settlements such as Buddo hill with a totemic symbol capable of capturing the metaphysical capacities of their intermediary role. Michael G. Kenny, "Mutesa's Crime: Hubris and the Control of African Kings," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, 4 (1988): 610, n. 52.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of this process, see Kodesh, "Beyond the Royal Gaze," ch. 4. For an analysis of the ritual symbolism of the Buddo rites, see Benjamin Ray, *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship in Buganda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 78–86. For descriptions of the rites, see Kagwa, *Customs*, 11–13; Kagwa, *Kings of Buganda*, 79; John Roscoe, *The Baganda*, 190–96; and Barolomayo M. Zimbe, *Buganda Ne Kabaka* (Uganda: Gambuze, 1939), 79–82.

⁵⁶ Nsimbi, *Amannya Amaganda*, 154.

⁵⁷ Robert Pickering Ashe, *Chronicles of Uganda* (New York: Randolph, 1895), 111–13.

The most venerated drum in the Ganda royal battery further reveals a connection between the Lungfish clan and python centers such as Buddo hill. Known as Ttimba—the Luganda word for ‘python’—this drum acquired its name from the relief of a serpent carved on its body. A member of the Lungfish clan who lived on Bugala island in the Ssesse archipelago served as the drum’s guardian. The drum’s name and its association with the Lungfish clan and the Ssesse islands suggests that prior to becoming part of the royal battery of drums, Ttimba was employed by mediums and priests at possession rituals that occurred at python centers.⁵⁸

The numerous linkages between the Lungfish clan, Buddo hill, and the lacustrine cultural complex suggest the following scenario: Ssemanobe, the Lungfish guardian-priest at Buddo hill, managed a drum similar to Ttimbo as part of his priestly duties. At public ceremonies resembling the one Roscoe described at Bulonge, residents of Buddo hill assembled to perform a series of rituals designed to ensure the community’s continued prosperity. The hill’s Lungfish clan guardians directed the community’s offerings and ritual efforts towards a spiritual force named Bemba, which manifested itself as a python and drew on a complex set of ideas connecting fertility, spirit possession, and the mediating powers of Lake Victoria. Bemba’s demotion in Ganda dynastic and clan histories to the role of tyrannical ruler, then, represented the outcome of profound changes linking Kintu’s ‘home’ at Magonga and the lacustrine cultural complex on Lake Victoria’s western shorelines. As suggested in the Kintu and Bemba narrative, the capacity to connect these two nodes of authority rested with the Pangolin clan leader Mukiibi, whose role in the narrative requires further explication.

MUKIIBI: MEDIUMSHIP AND SPIRITUAL PORTABILITY

One of the striking features of “Kintu and Bemba the Snake” lies in the geographical distance separating Kintu’s inland ‘home’ at Magonga and Bemba’s lakeside dwelling at Buddo hill. Building on the argument presented above that the Kintu and Bemba characters represent territorial *misambwa* spirits at their respective abodes, we can imagine Kintu’s defeat of Bemba as the enlargement of the territory of healing over which Kintu and his representatives exercised authority. As other scholars have noted, the key to understanding how territorial spirits could have become portable rests in the connection between mediums and the institution of spirit possession, through which

⁵⁸ A similar transition seems to have occurred in Bunyoro, where the *ntimbo* drums constituted a crucial part of both royal accession rituals and initiation ceremonies surrounding *mbandwa* spirit possession practices. Allan J. Lush, “Kiganda Drums,” *Uganda Journal* 3, 1 (1935): 9; Elisa Muwanga and the Council of the Ssiga of Jjumba, *Ekitabo Eky’essiga Lya Jjumba* (Kampala: Makerere University College Library, 1964), 10; Kakoma, Ntate, and Serukaga, *Ekitabo Eky’Aba-kyanjove*, 46; Kenny, “Powers of Lake Victoria,” 728; Tantala, “Early History of Kitara,” 611, 646, n. 35; Margaret Trowell and K. P. Wachsmann, *Tribal Crafts of Uganda* (London, 1953), 366–67.

community members could communicate with territorial spirits at public gatherings such as those described by Roscoe at Bulonge.

Historical linguistic evidence suggests that between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries the ancestors of the Ganda and neighboring communities instituted an intellectual innovation that enabled the portability of territorial *misambwa* spirits. By joining spirits to their mediums rather than to a specific territory, these historical actors severed the limiting conceptual connection between spiritual and territorial authority.⁵⁹ No longer anchored in a particular locality, these transformed territorial spirits could extend the range of their healing capacities through the substantial efforts of professional itinerant mediums that carried these portable spirits to new settlements and drew upon their expanded capacities to meet the needs of larger communities. Mediums' endeavors to promote the efficacy of their spiritual benefactors involved the suppression or cooptation of local territorial spirits residing in the territories into which they traveled.⁶⁰ If listened to carefully—with an attention to how listeners might have consumed it in a shrine setting—"Kintu and Bemba the Snake" appears to be describing just such a process: the enlargement of territories of healing and the concomitant suppression of local spiritual forces. As mentioned above, itinerant mediums served as the key figures in this transformation, a development captured in the activities of the intermediary character Mukiibi.

Significantly, in the story of Kintu and Bemba, the conqueror-king Kintu did not personally defeat the tyrannical Bemba. Instead, he enlisted the assistance of the Pangolin clan leader Mukiibi and his representatives Nfudu and Kigave, who intervened on Kintu's behalf in order to protect the people from Bemba's misdeeds and restore order to the community. That the person or creature who mediated between Kintu and Bemba belonged to the Pangolin clan provides a compelling hint regarding the setting in which "Kintu and Bemba the Snake" emerged. In explaining the significance of the totems associated with Ganda clans, Ganda healers describe a world in which all non-human forms of life fall into one of five categories (*endyo*): animals (*ensolo*); creatures that fly (*ebibuuka*), including birds (*binonyi*); insects (*biwuka*); creatures of the lake, including fish (*byenyanja*), and plants (*kimera*).⁶¹ Often perceived as a cross between a mammal and a reptile, the pangolin—a type of white, scaly anteater—has many features of aquatic creatures yet lives exclusively on land. As such, it does not fit any of the prescribed

⁵⁹ The innovation is evidenced in the fact that the word *mbándwa* named both a medium and a spirit while *musambwa* named a spirit and its territorial location but not its medium. For the historical linguistic evidence supporting the nature and timing of this innovation, see Schoenbrun, *Green Place, Good Place*, 202–6.

⁶⁰ For an example from of this process involving the rise of Cwezi spirits in western Uganda, see Tantala, "Early History of Kitara," 257–357.

⁶¹ Ssalongo Lukoda Wamala Kaggwa, 4 Feb. 2002; Ssalongo Ssegujja Musisi, 16 Mar. 2002; Simon Mwebe, 5 May 2002.

categories according to which Ganda healers and others classify non-human forms of life. As an anomalous creature that eluded categorization according to the Ganda taxonomy of non-human beings, the pangolin possessed the necessary metaphysical associations required of a mediatory figure.⁶² The same qualities—the ability to serve in a mediating capacity—presumably fell to the leaders of those who adopted the pangolin as their totem.⁶³

Viewed in the context of Great Lakes healing practices, the role of the Mukiibi and Kigave characters resembled that played by mediums throughout the region, with the additional flourish that these characters could transport their mediating skills along with the spiritual forces they represented to new areas. According to the Kintu and Bemba narrative, the Pangolin clan leader Mukiibi first ‘met’ Kintu at the Leopard clan estate of Mangira in Kyaggwe, where he introduced Kintu to his two representatives Kigave and Nfudu. From Mangira, they journeyed together to another Leopard clan holding at Bukesa in Busujju, which served as the base from which Kigave and Nfudu formulated their plan to defeat Bemba. When viewed from the perspective of transformations in regional healing practices, these meetings represent the induction of a group of mediums headed by the Pangolin clan leader Mukiibi into a regional healing complex focused around the spirit Kintu and connected to groups of people who recognized the leopard as their totem. Armed with newly acquired mediating skills and the backing of their spiritual benefactor Kintu, Kigave and Nfudu set out for Buddo hill, where they encountered the followers of the *musambwa* Bemba. Kigave and Nfudu managed to convince the area’s inhabitants of Kintu’s superior healing capacities, a process that may have hinged on the greater access to wider productive, trade, and therapeutic networks offered by portable spirits and their representatives.⁶⁴ The success of Kigave and Nfudu resulted in Bemba’s depiction as a tyrannical, malevolent ruler and his defeat at the hands of Mukiibi’s representatives. Bemba’s decapitation served as a

⁶² Connections between the pangolin’s unusual physical characteristics and its metaphoric significance stretch well beyond Buganda and are particularly prevalent in central Africa. See Allen F. Roberts, *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous* (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1995), 83; Mary Douglas, “Animals in Lele Religious Symbolism,” *Africa* 27, 1 (1957): 46–58; Daniel Biebuyck, “Repartition et droits du pangolin chez les balega,” *Zaire* 7, 8 (1953): 899–934; F. Lukyn Williams, “Myth, Legend, and Lore in Uganda,” *Uganda Journal* 10, 2 (Sept. 1946): 69–70. The use of anomalous creatures as symbols for metaphysical activities is widespread through much of Sub-Saharan Africa. For an example from Southern Africa, see John M. Janzen, *Ngoma: Discourses of Healing in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 117.

⁶³ This conclusion accords with the extremely precise and calculated decisions made by diviners and mediums in many parts of Africa with respect to the creatures employed in their respective activities. See Philip M. Peek, “African Divination Systems: Non-Normal Modes of Cognition,” in, Philip M. Peek, ed., *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 198–99.

⁶⁴ For a discussion of the types of networks forged by itinerant mediums, see Kodesh, “Beyond the Royal Gaze,” ch. 2.

narrative device symbolizing the suppression of Bemba's medium, who could no longer be "seized by the head"⁶⁵ and direct the community's activities on behalf of the *musambwa* Bemba.⁶⁶ In presenting Bemba's head to Kintu, Kigave and Nfudu transferred these responsibilities to Kintu, the mediums through whom he spoke, and the priests who presided over his shrines.

CONCLUSION

When viewed with sensitivity towards its circulation and meaning in shrine settings, "Kintu and Bemba the Snake" captures a series of momentous developments in the realm of public healing. The transformation of previously territorial spirits into portable spiritual forces through the work of itinerant mediums expanded the territory over which a spiritual force—and its earthly representatives—could exercise authority. Historical linguistic evidence suggests that these developments occurred in Buganda between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, a period of increased competition as well as alliance between rival healing complexes situated at the forefront of Ganda politics.

The Kintu figure and the narratives surrounding his exploits underwent several transformations and reinterpretations in the periods that followed the intellectual and political developments described in this essay. In the mid-eighteenth century, royal chroniclers incorporated "Kintu and Bemba the Snake" into a royal dynastic narrative. In so doing, they bestowed an additional interpretation upon the narrative that transformed Kintu from *musambwa* spirit to dynastic founder. The Kintu figure also featured prominently in subsequent Ganda efforts to make sense of shifting realities.⁶⁷ For the tumultuous period preceding the establishment of the Uganda Protectorate, John Yoder has argued that Ganda leaders reshaped the stories of Kintu's actions in order to express concerns about the increasing incidence of state violence in the latter part of the nineteenth century.⁶⁸ Later, in the early colonial period, the impassioned debates over whether Kintu was an indigenous Ganda clearly drew upon

⁶⁵ The rich ethnographic record in the Great Lakes region consistently describes the state of possession as being seized on the head by an overpowering force.

⁶⁶ Bemba's decapitation brings to mind a similar story from nineteenth-century Mpororo/Ndorwa. When the soldiers of the well-known Rwandan king Rwabugiri sought to conquer Kigezi, Nyabingi mediums led the resistance against the expansionist Rwanda state. The king's soldiers found the most important medium, killed her, and took her head back to the royal court. The decapitated head, however, began to speak and reprimanded Rwabugiri, who ultimately removed his forces from the medium's territory. Unlike Nyabingi, however, Bemba's decapitation resulted in his demise and ultimate disappearance from Ganda history. M. J. Bessell, "Nyabingi," *Uganda Journal* 6, 2 (1938): 75–76.

⁶⁷ For an insightful account of some of the transformations in the Kintu figure in from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, see Henri Médard, "The Syncretic Changes, from the XVIII to the XX Century, of the Life of Kintu, First King of Buganda," paper presented at Makerere University, Kingship in Uganda Conference (Kampala, Uganda, 1997).

⁶⁸ John Yoder, "The Quest for Kintu and the Search for Peace: Mythology and Morality in Nineteenth-Century Buganda," *History in Africa* 15 (1988): 363–76.

emerging tensions between Ganda chiefs who had benefited from the agreement they had signed with the British in 1900 and those leaders who had lost most in the settlement.⁶⁹ The Kintu figure also played a critical role during this period in the efforts of Ganda Christian writers to domesticate Biblical teachings and consolidate their positions at the apex of the reconstituted political order.⁷⁰

Rather than effacing prior interpretations, however, these adaptations added additional layers of meaning to the Kintu narratives. In a sense, this process of reinterpretation preserved the narratives, which retained the “residua of previous presents”⁷¹ and continued to circulate in non-royal, non-Christian arenas where alternate epistemologies shaped the meaning listeners attributed to them. The silencing efforts of Christian missionaries, colonial officials, and elite Ganda converts marginalized the role of healers in shaping discursive contours. The narratives about Kintu that continue to circulate in healers’ shrines, however, illustrate how they did not wholly succeed in their task. In this respect, the Kintu narratives serve as a palimpsest whose layered contents reflect the accumulated historical record of Kintu’s transition in Buganda from one of several “Big People,” to *musambwa* spirit, to the founder and first king of Buganda.

The interpretive technique I employ in the analysis of “Kintu and Bemba the Snake” presented in this essay offers a means for historians of precolonial Africa to engage with scholars who work with oral sources relating to more recent periods both in Africa and elsewhere in the world. In a recent essay on African oral historiography, Barbara Cooper laments how the “methodological and conceptual challenges produced by African history have rendered it largely unintelligible to academic historians in general.” According to Cooper, the blame for this situation rests to a large extent with historians of Africa, who have not always recognized how their commitment to the use of oral sources constituted part of a broader post-World War II commitment within history as a discipline to the recovery and recuperation of marginalized voices. For Cooper, this lack of engagement with historians who work outside of Africa stems from the fact that the debates surrounding the use of oral sources in African history—particularly those that occurred in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—have tended to focus on the proper deployment of “oral traditions” to gain nuggets of evidence about the past rather than on broader concerns surrounding issues such as subjectivity and memory. “In our (Africanists’) defensiveness about the recoverability of the past,” she observes, “we

⁶⁹ Ray, *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship*, 99–103.

⁷⁰ Kodesh, “Beyond the Royal Gaze,” 101–7.

⁷¹ William F. Hanks, *Language and Communicative Practices* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 274.

have neglected to engage in debate with the many historians of other parts of the world whose work has been very much in sympathy with our own."⁷²

In urging historians of Africa to situate their work within broader concerns shared by colleagues outside of African Studies, Cooper points to several missed opportunities for engaging in such discussions with respect to the use of oral sources for writing history. One of the missed opportunities she highlights occurred in the 1980s when historians of Africa began to pay increasing attention to the potential usefulness of examining inconsistencies and disagreements in oral traditions. In focusing on how political struggles and memory shaped oral traditions, these historians offered a response to structuralist interpretations developed in the 1970s that emphasized the universal (timeless) and symbolic dimensions of African oral traditions.⁷³ As Cooper notes, these efforts occurred at the same time that oral historians working on other parts of the world began to examine the subjectivity of historical memory.⁷⁴ Despite the potential for fruitful engagements, however, these communities of historians failed to find common grounds for discussion.⁷⁵

The focus on subjectivity and variability in recent analyses of oral histories in Africa resonates with the concerns of oral historians working in other parts of the world. In this respect, these analyses present an opportunity for Africanists to engage in conversations with a broader community of scholars. This shift in focus, however, has come at the expense of an earlier concern with the use of oral sources for writing histories of Africa prior to the twentieth century. As a result, there currently exists a split between scholars who examine "oral traditions" and those who focus on oral histories pertaining to more recent periods.

This essay offers a way of bridging this recent but increasingly widening methodological and interpretive gulf. Part of the recent critique of earlier practices of oral historical practices in Africa revolves around the notion that what oral narratives purport to describe—the past actions and events that for scholars of oral "tradition" represented the substance of history—constitute only part of their communicative force. Similar renditions of the same narrative can be read or heard on different levels, and there are different dominant interpretations depending on setting and audience. The most widespread interpretation at any given moment, or the interpretation propagated by those in dominant positions of semantic creativity, represents the outcome of considerable struggle. Unearthing these historical contests and the layers of meaning they engender for the more distant past is no simple matter, particularly when (as in

⁷² Cooper, "Oral Sources."

⁷³ See, for example, the contributions to Joseph C. Miller, ed., *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Hamden: Archen, 1980).

⁷⁴ Cooper points in particular to Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli's work on student uprisings in Italy during the 1960s.

⁷⁵ Cooper, "Oral Sources," 195–96.

Buganda) the locally constituted sites of production and reception in which they were actualized no longer function as they did in the past. As illustrated in the case of “Kintu and Bemba the Snake,” however, the benefits of embarking on such endeavors are substantial in that they open the door for new avenues of interpretation that provide novel insights into the histories of regions for periods not easily accessible by conventional methodologies.

Perhaps, then, we have reached an appropriate moment for revisiting some of the well-known oral traditions that so intrigued historians of Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. Armed with the methodological techniques and analytical insights derived from the more recent work on oral histories, historians of Africa are now in a position to re-examine these traditions with an eye towards their circulation in previously overlooked sites of production and reception. If oral narratives circulated in a variety of different manners and had a multiplicity of meanings and lives in the colonial and postcolonial periods, so too did they in the more distant past. Moreover, the multiple sites at which these narratives had life meant that “traditions” were diffuse and scattered, rather than singular and concentrated. Narratives such as “Kintu and Bemba the Snake” provide illuminating insights into early periods in African history. But they can only do so if we exercise our historical imagination in an effort to understand the generic framework and the criteria of plausibility according to which various sorts of audiences might have understood them.