

# Understanding the Limits to Ethnic Change: Lessons from Uganda's "Lost Counties"

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The historically constructed nature of ethnicity has become a widely accepted paradigm in the social sciences. Scholars have especially focused on the ways modern states have been able to create and change ethnic identities, with perhaps the strongest case studies coming from colonial Africa, where the gap between strong states and weak societies has been most apparent. I suggest, however, that in order to better understand how and when ethnic change occurs it is important to examine case studies where state-directed ethnic change has failed. To rectify this oversight I examine the case of the "lost counties" of Uganda, which were transferred from the Bunyoro kingdom to the Buganda kingdom at the onset of colonial rule. I show that British attempts to assimilate the Banyoro residents in two of the lost counties were an unmitigated failure, while attempts in the other five counties were successful. I claim that the reason for these differing outcomes lies in the status of the two lost counties as part of the historic Bunyoro homeland, whereas the other five counties were both geographically and symbolically peripheral to Bunyoro. The evidence here thus suggests that varying ethnic attachments to territory can lead to differing outcomes in situations of state-directed assimilation and ethnic change.

The historically constructed nature of ethnicity has become a widely accepted paradigm in the social sciences over the past several decades. As a result of the backlash against the formerly dominant primordialist paradigm, whereby ethnic groups were deemed to be ancient and unchanging, it is now posited that ethnicity can be created and shaped by economic or political institutions. This argument—whose advocates are usually grouped under the term "constructivism"—has been elucidated in a variety of contexts.<sup>1</sup>

This shift has resulted in a large amount of recent research into how and when states have been able to create, shape and even eliminate ethnic and national groups. Much focus has been given to the process of state-directed assimilation of ethnic minorities and immigrants into a dominant majority national culture.<sup>2</sup> Yet, considering the long history of social bonds outside the realms of the state in the western world, many scholars have disputed the

ability of modern states like the U.S. and France to enforce assimilation of its ethnic and immigrant minorities.<sup>3</sup> If, then, the goal of this constructivist shift in the study of ethnicity is to investigate how and when political phenomena affect ethnic identity, it is not clear that western nation-states are ideal case studies. Rather, one would need to find both strong states, with autonomy from civil society and the bureaucratic means to carry out social projects, and weak societies unable to counter the effects of these states. Indeed, as suggested by James Scott in his analysis of modern statehood, the most severe state-initiated social engineering requires both an authoritarian state "willing and able to use the full weight of its coercive power" and "a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans."<sup>4</sup>

In this sense it may be that the African colonial state can provide such a best case scenario for the study of state-directed ethnic change for two reasons. First, colonial states held modern authoritarian bureaucratic power autonomous from those Africans over whom they ruled. In the extreme way they were organized for the purpose of extraction and repression, African colonial states were possibly more similar in their absolutism to the *ancient regime* of France than contemporary European governments or previous colonial states in the Americas or Asia.<sup>5</sup> Second, as African pre-colonial societies were characterized by low population densities, fragile indigenous states, and ethnically diverse populations, they would have been in a

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uniquely frail position to resist the power of the colonial state to effect ethnic change and assimilation. Moreover, the effect of colonization itself, especially through war and the arbitrary creation of boundaries cutting across societies, weakened much of what existed of pre-colonial civil society. Thus the gap between this strong colonial state, which Crawford Young calls “the purest modern form of autonomous bureaucratic autocracy,”<sup>6</sup> and the fragmented and weak societies across the continent means that the African colonial state is an ideal case study for state-directed social change.

As expected, a variety of scholars have taken up this research challenge, noting the ways colonial states created, shaped, and changed ethnic identities in Africa.<sup>7</sup> Through the drawing of colonial boundaries and the help of administrators and missionaries, the African colonial state was able to delineate new ethnic groups, amalgamate others, and even, in the case of the Herero of German South-West Africa, come close to eliminating at least one ethnic group in an early example of modern genocide.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, even those who have claimed the African colonial state to be much weaker than is normally claimed still agree that it was able to shape ethnic identities in quite profound ways.<sup>9</sup>

Yet much of this recent research on ethnicity and the African colonial state has suffered from a problem of selection bias. More specifically, constructivists have tended to contrast those ethnic groups invented by colonialists with those that already existed and thus did not need to be invented. What is missing in this account is an investigation into instances of ethnic groups that colonialists attempted but failed to invent, which would provide us with means to understand the limits to state-directed ethnic change. If no such examples exist or can be explained away as exceptional, then we should be able to confirm the proposition that modern nation-states are indeed able to shape local ethnic identities in a profound way. However, if we can find an anomaly of failed assimilation in what should be a best or “crucial case” scenario for the study of state-led ethnic change, then we would better understand how and why ethnic change does not occur.<sup>10</sup>

To rectify this oversight, in this essay I examine the case of the so-called “Lost Counties” of Uganda, which British officials transferred from the Bunyoro kingdom to the Buganda kingdom at the onset of colonial rule. I show that attempts to assimilate the Banyoro residents of two of the five lost counties, Buyaga and Bugangaizi, into Bugandan society over the colonial period were an unmitigated failure, a fact most evident in the overwhelming vote for secession from Buganda in a 1964 referendum in the two counties. However, the Ugandan colonial state was much more successful at assimilating residents of the other five lost counties, inasmuch as there has been neither a demand for a referendum on secession from Buganda nor any indication in census records or popular politics that these residents continue to define themselves as Banyoro. I claim

that the reason why the colonial state was unable to promote assimilation of the Banyoro of Buyaga and Bugangaizi into Buganda was due to the pre-colonial status of Buyaga and Bugangaizi as part of the core Bunyoro “homeland” and the subsequent strong ethnic attachment to the two counties; the colonial state was more successful in the other lost counties because of their lack of homeland status. This evidence thereby demonstrates that the presence or absence of homelands and the resulting varying intensity of pre-existing ethnic identities can explain the differing abilities of states to assimilate ethnic groups. As such, the case of the lost counties suggests that even the strongest of states are limited in their ability to alter strongly-held identities with territorial roots, a lesson that has implications for assimilation policies in the modern world.

This article is structured as follows. I examine constructivist theories of ethnic change in relation to colonial Africa. I then show in how the colonial administration in the lost counties encouraged assimilation and ethnic change through a variety of means but nonetheless failed in its efforts. The reason for this failure, I argue, lies in the pre-colonial history of the lost counties. Finally, I conclude by suggesting implications of the article as regards the relationship between the modern state and ethnicity.

## On the Colonial Creation of Ethnicity

Up until around 1970, the primordialist paradigm of ethnicity held dominance among academics, colonial officials, and others. This thesis held that Africans were all members of “tribes,” which had existed since ancient times in an unchanged state. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, anthropologists took the lead in suggesting that “tribes”—which they suggested should henceforth be known as “ethnic groups,” as they were elsewhere in the world—were in fact of modern origin.<sup>11</sup> Over the next three decades many scholars developed the argument that ethnic groups were more specifically of colonial origin and that they were constructed or invented during colonial rule through a variety of means, including mapping regions and the work of missionaries, local colonial officials and anthropologists.<sup>12</sup>

The most powerful critique of colonial practice has come from those scholars who have argued that the colonial state itself had the largest influence in (re)creating and inventing ethnic groups.<sup>13</sup> This process lay in the belief among the colonial powers that Africans naturally lived in “tribes,” each complete with its own homeland, culture, language and political institutions. Due in part to the ideology of nationalism then sweeping Europe, colonialists often idealized these pre-colonial “tribes” and set out to perpetuate their political institutions through the policy of indirect rule as a means to preserve them against the onslaught of modernity. Thus colonialists set up a system of local political units which, ideally, were ethnically homogenous and ruled by “tribal chiefs” according to “tribal custom.” However, this motive

existed alongside the economic imperative of running colonies on the cheap, which meant that colonial powers were often led to create new languages, new political and legal institutions, new “invented traditions” and, in effect, new ethnic groups altogether in order to better administer their new territories.

Over the course of colonial rule Africans legitimated these new ethnic identities in two ways. First, politics in rural areas was structured through these local “tribal” units, thereby leading Africans to mobilize politically along ethnic rather than national lines. Second, in responding to the uncertainties and moral crises of colonialism and modernity more generally, Africans sought refuge and found meaning in ethnicity.<sup>14</sup> Thus, by the end of colonialism, the new ethnic entities created at its onset had not only taken hold but had become perhaps the most important source of social cleavage in Africa.

This argument has gained much weight within the field of African studies, leading Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz to write that “there is now ample evidence of what has been called the ‘invention of ethnicity,’ by which is meant the ways in which it was constructed and instrumentalized during the colonial period.”<sup>15</sup> Yet some scholars as have attempted to balance out this analysis with a more nuanced approach, arguing that invention was a matter of degree, since, while some ethnic groups were invented under colonialism, many other ethnic groups could trace their continuity back to the pre-colonial era. For instance, Crawford Young contrasts the Baganda and Banyoro, “whose political identity readily translated into ethnic ideology,” with other Ugandan “novel ethnic entities” like the Acholi, Bagisu, and Bakiga.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, for the purposes of colonial administration some—in fact, most—ethnic groups needed to be invented while others like the Baganda and Banyoro did not, and the roles of the administrative “chiefs” in the latter case could be adapted from pre-colonial times rather than invented out of thin air. As a result, many scholars would agree with Chabal and Daloz that “some ethnic groups were more creatively invented during colonial rule than others,”<sup>17</sup> and their task is to elucidate the nature and extent of this invention. Yet, as we are about to see, this paradigm fails to account for the varied outcomes of Uganda’s lost counties, where the colonial state was unable to promote assimilation along the lines suggested by constructivism.

## How the Lost Counties Were Lost

When the first European explorers arrived in the 1860s in what is now Uganda, the kingdom of Buganda was at the height of its political powers over neighboring kingdoms on the north shore of Lake Victoria. To its north was the formerly powerful kingdom of Bunyoro, which had once controlled large sections of what is now southern and south-

west Uganda but had been declining in regional power and influence since the seventeenth century. After a highly tumultuous period in the 1880s whereby roughly equal halves of the Bugandan population were converted to Protestantism and Catholicism, the British were able to sign a treaty with the *Kabaka* (king) of Buganda and then use Buganda as a base for extending their rule throughout the surrounding area. Colonel Henry Colvile was assigned in 1893 to take control of the Nile basin north of Buganda, which inevitably led to clashes with the obstinate Kabalega, the *Omukama* (king) of Bunyoro, whose troops Colvile pushed back to north of the Kafu river before conquering the kingdom altogether. This war of pacification was extremely bloody: while the full scale of the violence is unclear, it is certain that it led to the deaths or forced migration of a large majority of the kingdom’s subjects, a demographic collapse from which the Banyoro did not recover for more than a half-century.<sup>18</sup>

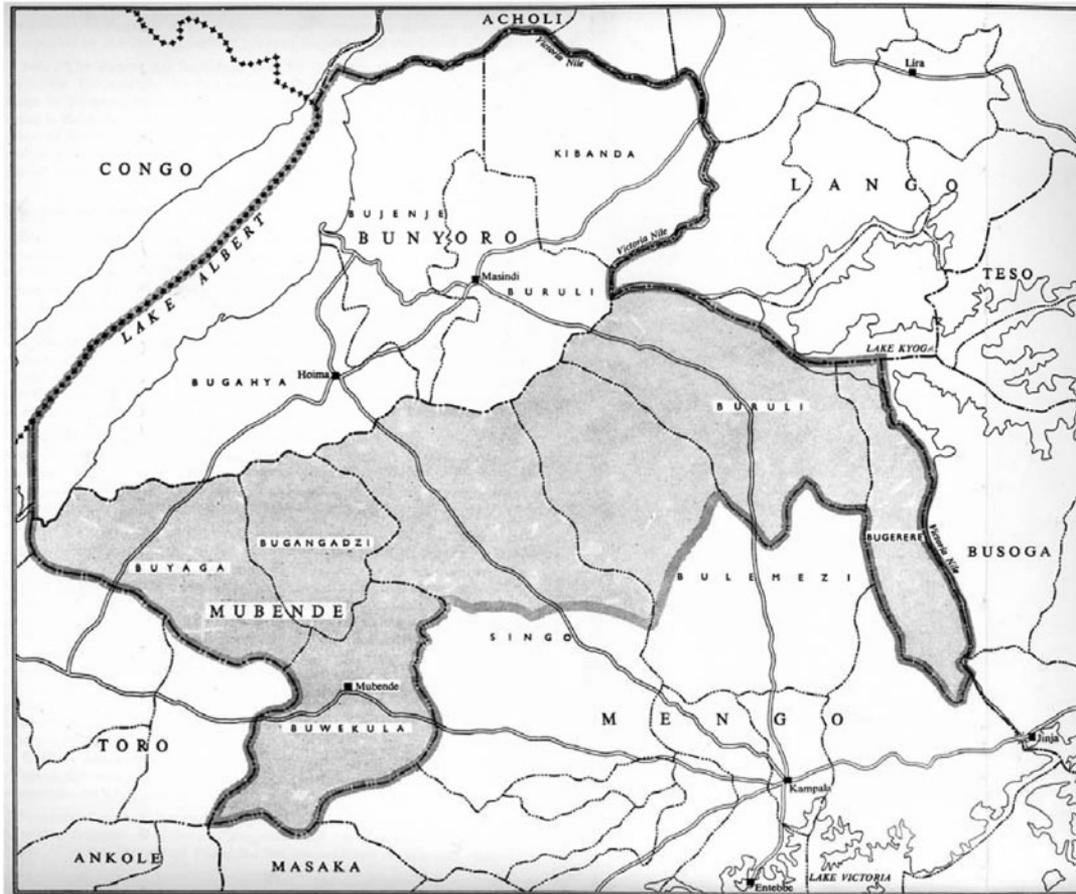
Before ending his tour of duty in 1894, Colonel Colvile promised conquered territory south of the Kafu River to Bugandan chiefs (refer to map 1). Colvile’s successor, EJL Berkeley wrote that

The annexed provinces in becoming part of the Kingdom of Uganda, must, of course recognize the sovereignty of the King of Uganda, the supremacy and authority of the chiefs selected (with the approval of Her Majesty’s Commissioner) to govern them, and they must understand that henceforth they are subject to all laws, regulations, obligations as to local taxation and tribute, etc. that are in force in the other parts of the Kingdom. At the same time, however, that these provinces became part of the Kingdom of Uganda so would their native inhabitants become Waganda, and, as such, entitled to all the public and private rights of Waganda in any other part of the Kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, Berkeley did not see a reason why those inhabitants of the region who had survived the pacification war would not assimilate into Buganda as they were governed by Bugandan chiefs and laws. Thus Berkeley’s conception that the resident Banyoro would “become Waganda” because they were now part of the Buganda kingdom corresponds exactly to the constructivist paradigm of ethnicity conforming to colonial administrative boundaries rather than the other way around.

Despite the fact that resistance to the transfer began immediately, Berkeley’s successors nonetheless accepted the annexation as final. It did not matter that only later, after the lost counties had been incorporated into Mubende district, did the British find out that the lost counties hosted all the tombs of all former *Abakama* (kings) of Bunyoro, for which they allowed the Bunyoro Native Government to appoint a special salaried chief (the *Mugema*) to reside in Buganda and look after the tombs in 1915. Indeed, the British continued to ignore the nine formal requests of various *Abakama* to have the matter investigated between 1931 and 1958, while similarly denying the requests of the Mubende Banyoro Committee (MBC),

**Map 1**  
**Areas (in grey) transferred to Buganda in 1893**



Source: Munster Commission 1961.

a local political group formed in 1921, to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1951, 1953, and 1955 and the request of the Legislative Council member for Bunyoro, GBK Magezi, in 1955. Repeatedly British officials claimed that, in the words of Governor Frederick Crawford in 1957, “nothing can be done about that now,” or, in the words of the Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1931, “it is a long time [since the lost counties were incorporated into Buganda] and this matter was settled during the time of fighting, so we cannot now do anything further in the matter.”<sup>20</sup> The multiple pleas by the Banyoro petitioners exasperated British officials like Chief Secretary C.H. Hartwell, who in 1955 stated that “in a matter of this kind there must be some finality, and in this case it must be accepted that the final decision has been taken.”<sup>21</sup>

There is no doubt that the British were content to have the issue of the lost counties disappear through the assimilation of the resident Banyoro, a point admitted by Governor Crawford when he wrote that “there is some evidence that deliberate attempts were made to assimilate the

Banyoro in the ‘lost counties’ and that in the 1930s these attempts were encouraged by the Protectorate Government.”<sup>22</sup> One must assume that Crawford was referring to the recommendation by the District Commissioner of Mubende in the 1930s that, due to “sporadic unrest” that troubled Buyaga and Bugangaizi “throughout the colonial period,” the *Mugema* should be removed “on the ground that he represented the opinion of only a small fraction of the Banyoro.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet this strategy of assimilation was by no means limited to the 1930s, nor was it limited to exerting influence over the Buganda kingdom officials who governed the lost counties. Indeed, the Buganda kingdom government, which had existed in pre-colonial times but whose powers to enforce “tribal customs” were greatly increased by the British, used a variety of means to promote assimilation in the lost counties. For instance, a representative from the area to the Uganda Constitutional Conference in 1961 claimed that, “if the Banyoro do anything in a way different from that practiced by Baganda, they are liable to be

prosecuted for breach of Kiganda customary law,” including barring “the inhabitants of the lost counties from dancing and singing in their traditional Kinyoro style.”<sup>24</sup> In his petition to the British government on the issue *Omukama* Tito Winyi also noted that in the lost counties “dancing in the Kinyoro style is illegal, and all dancing must be in the Kiganda style, which is foreign to the Banyoro people.”<sup>25</sup>

Attempts to assimilate the Banyoro in the lost counties hardly stopped at the dancehall doors. More generally, in a classic assimilationist strategy,<sup>26</sup> the Buganda Kingdom government both created incentives for assimilation and, perhaps more importantly, failed to discriminate against resident Banyoro along ethnic lines. In this sense it is clear that local Banyoro were not treated as badly as some Bunyoro kingdom officials claimed:<sup>27</sup> as Governor Crawford noted,

it is a matter of opinion whether the Baganda have deliberately attempted to keep the Banyoro in a state of inferiority and to eliminate Kinyoro customs and the Lunyoro language. The Baganda definitely look upon the inhabitants of the county as Baganda or potential Baganda, and would see no reason why they should be treated as a tribal minority.<sup>28</sup>

One assimilative strategy in the lost counties was the uniform use of Luganda and not Lunyoro as an official language, a fact noted by the MBC in 1960: “the suppression of our mother tongue, Lunyoro, hurts us beyond imagination. Our children are taught in a foreign language in the very first years of their education, and . . . our language has been banned in Court, Offices, Churches in addition to Schools.”<sup>29</sup> Yet colonial officials neither saw a need to set up Lunyoro-language schools nor did they feel that the native Banyoro should have a problem learning Luganda. For instance, Governor Crawford claimed that “Luganda And Lunyoro are both Bantu languages with great similarities. . . A Munyoro [singular of Banyoro] living in Buganda has very little difficulty in learning to speak Luganda fluently.”<sup>30</sup> The Molson Commission, whose job it was to recommend a resolution to the dispute over the lost counties before Ugandan independence, agreed, noting that

our impression is that the majority of Banyoro have little practical difficulty with Luganda. We regard the question of language as essentially a political issue of a kind common in many countries. From a purely administrative point of view, it is natural and reasonable that the *Kabaka's* Government should insist on the use of a single language throughout its administrative, judicial and educational systems.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, British officials did not see a problem in either forcing Banyoro to speak, read, and write Luganda or even register themselves as with Bugandan names. *Omukama* Winyi complained that “when the Banyoro go to register births at the *Gombolola* [sub-county] offices, they are compelled to enter in the register a Luganda name for

the child, and to register his clan according to the Kiganda clan system and not the Kinyoro system.”<sup>32</sup> Again, the Molson Commission noted

it is understandable that the *Kabaka's* Government should persuade and encourage alien tribesmen living in Buganda to regard themselves as Baganda. The use of Baganda names would be a natural outcome of this policy; and indeed, such a policy was positively encouraged by Mr. Berkeley, the then Commissioner of Uganda, as early as 1896.<sup>33</sup>

Going so far to even call this policy a “legitimate attempt by the Buganda authorities at assimilation,” the Molson Commission suggested that the reason some Banyoro changed their names to Bugandan ones was “either because they have come to regard themselves as Baganda, or because they feel that the path of life will be easier for doing so.”<sup>34</sup>

The assumption that Banyoro would have an easier “path of life” with a Bugandan name also applied to Buganda kingdom government university scholarships. After a trip to the region in 1957 the British MP Eirene White complained that the only way for a resident Munyoro to get a university scholarship is “to declare that he is a Baganda,”<sup>35</sup> a point repeated by *Omukama* Winyi in his claim that only “pure Baganda” could be considered for a Buganda bursary or scholarship. “If an applicant for such a scholarship states on his application form that he is a member of any tribe other than the Baganda, his application is not even considered.”<sup>36</sup>

As with forcing Banyoro to register themselves with Luganda-language names, such a strategy of only allowing Baganda to receive university scholarships created significant incentives for Banyoro to self-identify as Baganda. Simultaneously, however, there is little evidence that Banyoro suffered severely from a lack of education that would have prevented them from competing with other residents of Baganda for jobs and scholarships. While statistics do not exist for the general well-being of the Banyoro in the lost counties, we can take the population of Mubende district, 70.0 percent of whom were registered as Banyoro in the 1948 Census,<sup>37</sup> as a proxy for the treatment of Banyoro in Buganda. In doing so we can see the lack of any overt discrimination: indeed, according to Governor Crawford “the percentage of places available in primary schools in relation to child population [in 1959] is higher in Mubende District (57.4) than that in Buganda as a whole (51.9)” and the Protectorate (49.3).<sup>38</sup> Similarly, by 1959 the percentage of men in Mubende district who had attended school at some point was, at 47.9 percent, higher than in East Mengo (44.4 percent) or Masaka (42.9 percent) districts, an impressive achievement considering that men over 45 in Mubende had the lowest schooling rates in Buganda. While the percentage of women in Mubende who had attended school was the lowest among the four districts, as indicated in table 1 the gap between Mubende and West Mengo had lessened from a ratio of 11.6 to 1 for

**Table 1**  
**Percentages of the population of Buganda in 1959 who had ever attended school, by age**

	Male			Female		
	6–15	16–45	Over 45	6–15	16–45	Over 45
West Mengo	65.9	61.7	36.7	57.7	46.5	13.9
East Mengo	55.8	46.9	26.8	45.7	32.5	8.2
Mubende	58.9	54.6	19.1	40.2	22.2	1.2
Masaka	51.3	46.9	23.0	43.6	28.4	3.8

Source: Protectorate of Uganda 1961.

those educated in the 1920s to 1.4 to 1 by the 1950s. This should be seen as a considerable achievement if one recalls that Mubende district was cut off from both railroad and lake transportation and that the population density in Mubende was only 37.1 people per square mile in 1959, far below that of the Bugandan average of 113.7 and even less than the average of 38.9 in the North.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, with the exception of the initial colonial period there is little evidence that the Banyoro in the lost counties were poorly treated in comparison to other inhabitants in similarly outlying areas of Buganda or even in regards to residents of Buganda as a whole; in this sense it would have been difficult to support an anti-Buganda campaign in the lost counties on the basis of unequal treatment. From 1929 through 1951 the poll tax in Mubende district was only 10 Ush per person, as compared to 15 Ush elsewhere in Buganda and 18 Ush in nearby Lango.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, residents of the lost counties were relatively healthy compared to the rest of the population: there were three times more hospital beds and twice as many medical staff per 100,000 residents at government hospitals in Mubende than in West Mengo, and Buyaga and Bugangaizi did not, unlike other counties in Buganda, suffer from any tsetse fly problems. Similarly, as regards efforts to eliminate leprosy, the Government of Buganda noted that “much progress and most satisfactory results have been achieved in Mubende district, that there is much to be done in Mengo district and that in Masaka district we have almost to start from scratch.”<sup>41</sup>

When discrimination did take place, however, Banyoro could rely upon relatively equal and fair treatment by the Bugandan government. As one British government commission noted, “we were constantly told of a woman who had been fined for speaking the language of Bunyoro in court, but the complainants never mentioned that the conviction was reversed on appeal by the Principal Court of Buganda.”<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the most-cited example of supposed discrimination against the Banyoro—namely that their land was taken away from them in the 1900 Agreement between the British and Bugandan government and

given to absentee Bugandan landlords, leaving them with only 70 of the 2995 square miles in the two counties<sup>43</sup>—appears less egregious when one considers that the Agreement “dispossessed in equal measure the majority of the Baganda peasantry of their occupancy rights. . . . The justification for the 1900 Land Settlement may be debatable, but we are satisfied that it was applied uniformly to Baganda and Banyoro.”<sup>44</sup> The same qualification goes for the total lack of any Banyoro appointed as county chiefs for the two lost counties over the whole colonial period, as county chiefs were almost always appointed from among the landholding elite,<sup>45</sup> while the Banyoro as a whole in Buganda were nonetheless overrepresented among government employees.<sup>46</sup>

## Explaining Ethnicity in the Lost Counties

Despite these various attempts at assimilating the Banyoro into Buganda, towards the end of colonial rule British officials like Governor Crawford had begun to admit that these efforts had “not, however, met with any conspicuous success.”<sup>47</sup> Yet the question remains as to why indigenous Banyoro in Buyaga and Bugangaizi failed to assimilate into Buganda when the Buganda kingdom was able to assimilate non-Buganda at other times and in other places. In pre-colonial times the Buganda kingdom had been quite capable of assimilating conquered peoples, including the residents of southern area of Buddu (comprising the contemporary district of Masaka; refer to map 1). After Buganda invaded the area sometime around 1800, the Buddu residents were assimilated to the point where, after four generations at the most, they spoke Luganda without a trace of Lunyoro or even a regional dialect.<sup>48</sup>

The Baganda were well known for their ability to assimilate other peoples in the colonial period as well, most obviously in the case of the numerous Banyarwanda who migrated from Rwanda from the 1920s through the 1950s. This population, which was largely Hutu and was thus better able to fit into the “agrarian cultural context” of

**Table 2**  
**Percentage of selected ethnic groups in the five lost counties**

County	Census	Baganda	Banyoro	Banyankole	Basoga	Banyarwanda	Barundi
Buruli	1921	12.3	86.5	0.1	0.5	*	*
	1959	60.1	2.2	13.2	0.2	1.8	0.3
Bugerere	1921	19.9	74.5	0.2	3.7	*	*
	1959	34.7	0.5	3.1	9.2	3.8	7.4
Buwekula	1921	41.6	60.4	1.7	0.0	*	*
	1959	56.6	13.1	9.7	0.0	5.7	0.5
Buyaga	1921	5.4	94.4	0.1	0.0	*	*
	1959	5.6	80.4	0.2	0.0	2.2	0.2
Bugangaizi	1921	10.2	89.6	0.0	0.0	*	*
	1959	19.2	75.6	0.2	0.9	2.0	0.3

\*Not recorded in census data

Sources: Protectorate of Uganda 1921, Protectorate of Uganda 1961.

Baganda, “sought to become a part of the local society, gradually assimilating, taking on local names, clan affiliations, spouses and even an overall identity.”<sup>49</sup> As a result the Banyarwanda went from 5.9 percent of the Ugandan population in 1959 to only 1.3 percent by 2002.

A similar phenomenon of assimilation took place among other non-Baganda, including the Banyoro in the other lost counties.<sup>50</sup> As the Molson Commission noted, “in Buwekula and in the areas to the east there are indications that a number of Banyoro have been assimilated successfully by the Baganda,” as indicated by relatively high rates of intermarriage between Banyoro and Baganda.<sup>51</sup> While the British were unequivocal in noting that the population of Buruli and Bugerere counties were initially “entirely made up of Banyoro” and “chiefly Banyoro,” respectively,<sup>52</sup> by the end of the colonial era neither Bugerere, Buruli nor Buwekula had anything close to a majority Banyoro population. Indeed, colonial census data shows both a sharp fall in the percentage of Banyoro as well as a rise in the number of Baganda recorded in the five counties between 1921 and 1959 despite the documented migration of Baganda away from these border counties.<sup>53</sup>

This phenomenon is perhaps most obvious when one notes the complete absence of any serious movement to be reincorporated into Bunyoro in the other lost counties over the past century, despite both the failure of the British to grant any of the other counties a referendum along with Buyaga and Bugangaizi and the persistent and ongoing attempts of the Bunyoro kingdom and the MBC to return all five counties to Bunyoro. Of these areas only the indigenous population of the district of Nakasongola, who largely now call themselves members of the Baruli ethnic group,<sup>54</sup> have had any hesitation in their loyalty to the Buganda kingdom. Yet despite the claim that “Baruli are actually Banyoro but they are mixed up,”<sup>55</sup> there is little to no evidence that any significant number of Baruli are interested

in returning to Bunyoro.<sup>56</sup> This difference with Buyaga and Bugangaizi—which comprise modern-day Kibaale district—was most striking in the constitutional process of the early 1990s, when Ugandans had the opportunity to voice their opinions about the future political structure of Uganda. Of the official submissions from the former lost counties, which had by then become five district governments, Kibaale was the only one which expressed any dissatisfaction with being part of a reconstituted Bugandan kingdom.<sup>57</sup>

Yet one possible response could be to claim that the population changes were less a result of assimilation than of migration flows, specifically the influx of Baganda and foreign immigrants such as the Banyarwanda and Barundi, who went from a negligible percentage of the Bugandan population to 19.3 percent between 1921 and 1959, and the outflow of Banyoro to other parts of Uganda. While it is true that some Banyoro did migrate to neighboring areas like Lango and Bunyoro itself,<sup>58</sup> there is little evidence that migration flows could fully account for such a drastic change in the ethnic composition of the lost counties. Indeed, the percentage of Banyoro residents decreased in other surrounding counties in Buganda and Busoga as well as in Kampala between 1921 and 1959. Furthermore, as table 2 indicates, migrating groups of Banyarwanda and Barundi largely avoided the lost counties, as did neighboring groups like the Basoga (from the east) and the Banyankole (from the west). Similarly, none of the lost counties saw any significant influx of Baganda during the colonial period, partially due to the climate in the eastern lost counties being more suitable to cassava and millet than to the plantain, the staple food of the Bugandan diet, and also due to the counties’ geographical remoteness from any major transportation hubs.<sup>59</sup>

Thus assimilation must account for at least some of the disparate paths during the colonial period of Buyaga and Bugangaizi on the one hand and the other lost counties

on the other. The most plausible explanation for this difference lies not, however, in any colonial policies, but rather in the pre-colonial past. As with the Baganda, Banyarwanda and other kingdom groups in the Great Lakes region, the Banyoro ethnic group owes its existence to the pre-colonial Bunyoro kingdom which had formerly dominated the region. For most of the pre-colonial period Buyaga and Bugangaizi lay at the heart of this kingdom, inasmuch as these two counties held most of the tombs of the former *Abakama*. These tombs would have been situated after a king's death either near a site of great importance during his lifetime or near the royal house;<sup>60</sup> along with other sacred sites, these tombs, while not well kept, were nonetheless considered important enough to be marked on maps of the area and continued to hold a significant amount of symbolic importance for the Banyoro in the colonial period.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, in his ethnographic field work in the 1950s John Beattie noted that tombs were considered "national shrines" and that all Banyoro with whom he spoke "knew that Buyaga and Bugangaizi counties had been the centre of the traditional Nyoro kingdom, and, despite their alienation, in an important sense they still were."<sup>62</sup>

However, the kingdom had only weak control over the other five lost counties in the pre-colonial period. As with the aforementioned case of Buddu, which was merely "in the orbit of Bunyoro" and was thus "ineffectively ruled,"<sup>63</sup> the Bunyoro kingdom was in effective occupation of only some sections of the other five counties, which were largely frontier lands.<sup>64</sup> Specifically, while Bugerere and other frontier counties may have technically been under the aegis of the *Omukama*, Beattie notes that pre-colonial Bunyoro nonetheless suffered from a lack of uniform government: "the more widely dispersed Nyoro state was very much less evenly administered [than Buganda, and] although in theory the *Omukama's* power was absolute, in day to day matters his authority declined as one approached the peripheral areas of the kingdom."<sup>65</sup> The long-standing frontier status of these counties explains why none of the *Abakama* from the late seventeenth century onwards were buried there.<sup>66</sup>

In other words, what made these two areas different was that Buyaga and Bugangaizi, with their sacred sites and royal tombs, comprised part of the historic "homeland" of Bunyoro, whereas the other counties were both geographically and symbolically peripheral to Bunyoro. For Anthony Smith, Monica Toft, and other scholars, a homeland is a key part of ethnic identity, in that it ties current generations of an ethnic group to older ones through the collection of myths and memories connecting the group's ancestors and the territory in question. This ethnic association with the territory, however, means as well that "the land's resources also become exclusive to the people; they are not for 'alien' use and exploitation,"<sup>67</sup> and that a key part of any legitimate claim to political

control over that territory is the idea that "a people with deep roots and a historical attachment to the land have a right to control it."<sup>68</sup>

Whereas this "homeland principle" was formulated by Smith and Toft in relation to nationalism rather than assimilation, it goes a long way towards explaining the Ugandan case study examined here. Inasmuch as Buyaga and Bugangaizi was the pre-colonial homeland of the Banyoro people, its Banyoro residents would have been much less interested in assimilating into Buganda as doing so would have involved negating a core part of their ethnic identity. However, Banyoro residents in the other counties and in Buddu, let alone the Banyarwanda immigrants to Uganda mentioned above, did not have a strong ethnic attachment to the land on which they lived and could therefore assimilate more easily, safe in the knowledge that their assimilation had not done any serious damage to the future of their previous ethnic group. Thus this differing quality of attachment to territory and ethnic identity explains the very different rates of assimilation during the colonial period, even though residents in all of the counties could have been categorized as Banyoro at the onset of colonial rule.

## Conclusion

This article has suggested that the presence or absence of a pre-colonial homeland explains why the Ugandan colonial state failed to direct assimilation in Buyaga and Bugangaizi but succeeded in the other five lost counties. If, as demonstrated in the introduction, we take the Ugandan and other African colonial states as "crucial case" studies in the study of state-directed ethnic change, then we are left with at least three implications as regards the relationship between states and ethnic change. First, the evidence presented here suggests that ethnic identities, whether in Africa or elsewhere, vary significantly in their intensity and that this variation can lead to varying outcomes when states attempt to assimilate these groups. In contrast, in many historical or contemporary studies of ethnicity and nationalism, there is often an unfortunate assumption that all ethnic and national identities are of the same order and intensity. This fault originated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when colonial rulers saw themselves as belonging to one and only one nation and their subjects as members of one and only one tribe, each of which was assumed to have the same intensity of attachment. Today, while the constructivist turn has led to the understanding that people can and usually do hold multiple ethnic identities, it is not yet clear that there has been enough attention given to the variation in the strength of these identities at a given point in time. Indeed, rational choice paradigms of ethnicity still assume the same intensity of identity for each group, a problem especially evident in the creation of world-wide data sets of ethnic

groups where each person is either a member of an ethnic group or is not.<sup>69</sup> What is evident in the story of the lost counties is that, due to the overlapping nature of the Bunyoro heartland and the Bunyoro state in the pre-colonial era, being Banyoro in Buddu and the eastern lost counties was quite different from being Banyoro in Buyaga and Bugangaizi, and that these differences had noticeable and profound consequences. Any attempt to code ethnicity in early colonial Uganda in a data set would have missed this varying intensity and would have therefore been unable to predict the differing outcomes of the lost counties over the course of the twentieth century.

Second, the Ugandan case suggests that even the strongest states are limited in their ability to effect ethnic change, and that this failure can have significant political outcomes. Not only was the Ugandan state unable to promote assimilation in Buyaga and Bugangaizi but, in the words of Governor Crawford in 1959, “if the problem of the ‘lost counties’ is not settled before Uganda becomes self-governing it could easily lead to early disruption of the new self-governing state, or even to civil war.”<sup>70</sup> In effect Crawford’s prediction was correct, as the transfer of the lost counties back to Bunyoro in the 1964 referendum led directly to the breakup of the two-party political coalition governing Uganda up to that point and indirectly to Milton Obote’s palace coup d’etat of 1966. Indeed, the failure of the 1964 referendum to redistribute land ownership from absentee Baganda landlords to local Banyoro residents has led more recently to brutal inter-ethnic clashes over land in the two lost counties and the deployment of riot police to contain the violence after elections in 2002 and 2006;<sup>71</sup> the claim among many Banyoro residents that internal migrants from elsewhere in Uganda have no right to land in the counties is reminiscent of Toft’s aforementioned argument about the link between indivisible territory and conflict.<sup>72</sup>

Both the failure of the Ugandan state to promote assimilation as well as the long-lasting political consequences of this failure thus contradict the assertion that the African colonial state was able to “delineate the strategic contexts in which ethnicity was or was not salient” and thereby “mould the choices of political actors with regard to both ascriptive markers of ethnicity and the organizational forms in which it was expressed.”<sup>73</sup> Far from having the “exceptional capacity . . . to impose its own images of society” as regards ethnicity,<sup>74</sup> the Protectorate state was unable to overcome the strength of pre-colonial ethnic identities in the lost counties. Certainly one lesson here would be that scholars attempting to account for ethnic change in the modern world ignore the pre-modern world at their peril. Indeed, as demonstrated by Anthony Smith and his “ethnosymbolist” school of nationalism studies, modern states have had problems forging national identities without a substantial collection of pre-modern ethnic myths and memories from which to draw upon.<sup>75</sup>

One could respond here by arguing that, because it was a large pre-colonial state, Bunyoro is exceptional and thus the case of lost counties does not add much to our more general understanding of ethnic change. Yet one should not forget that there were several other states just in the pre-colonial Great Lakes region, including Burundi, Kooki, Nkore, Rwanda, and Toro, whose pre-colonial political identities led directly to both a modern ethnic identity and an ethnic homeland in the colonial era. While these states may be exceptional in that they account for a minority of contemporary ethnic identities in the region, one would be hard pressed to understand post-colonial conflicts in the Great Lakes region without some understanding of these pre-colonial states, as Pierre Englebert has demonstrated elsewhere for Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.<sup>76</sup>

Third and finally, the Ugandan case study suggests that assimilation policies may need to be reconceived. If the colonial Ugandan state, with its great coercive power and frail civil society, could not enforce assimilation in the lost counties, where and when should we expect modern democratic states, with much less coercive power over their citizens and much more strongly organized civil societies, to promote assimilation successfully? Certainly the lesson here is that the presence of an ethnic homeland can make assimilation that much more difficult, as seen with the various failed attempts at assimilating the native inhabitants of Australia, Canada, and the United States, among others. Indeed, as noted by various scholars, Native Americans have both clung onto an identification with their own ethnic homelands while also resisting assimilation,<sup>77</sup> as have, in a more notorious fashion, the “stolen generations” of aboriginal children in Australia who were forcibly removed from their families and brought up as white Australians up until 1969.<sup>78</sup> The importance of an ethnic homeland in resisting assimilation also arguably underlies the recent attempt among American anti-immigration activists to popularize what they call *reconquista* theory, where the ultimate goal of Mexican immigrants is to reclaim their own “lost” territories in the south-western United States.<sup>79</sup> Despite the very dubious evidence behind this theory, it is clear that belief in it is both genuine and based in part on a worry that Mexicans might claim part of the United States as their homeland and therefore refuse to assimilate. Certainly the Ugandan case study presented here suggests that the presence of an ethnic homeland can significantly affect the success of assimilation policies amongst ethnic minorities, while ethnic minorities who do not live in what they consider to be their homeland—whether the Banyarwanda in colonial Uganda or contemporary immigrants to the United States—should be much easier to assimilate than those who do.

In the end the experience of the lost counties points to the need to formulate a more coherent and exact theory of ethnic change in the modern world. The recent

constructivist advances made in the study of ethnicity have helped us to understand better how, when, and why ethnic identities change; what is also necessary is to understand where these identities do and do not change and the underlying reasons for these differences. Hopefully the Ugandan evidence presented here will move us further along this path.

## Notes

- 1 The theoretical argument examined here is merely one variety of constructivism, which, more broadly speaking, can be said to encompass the ideas that ethnicity is multiple, fluid and endogenous to external phenomena. See Chandra 2005; see also Breuilly 1993; Brubaker 1996; Chandra 2005; Hechter 1974; Stevens 1999.
- 2 Alba and Nee 2003; Citrin et al. 2007; Gellner 1983, Weber 1976.
- 3 Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Silberman, Alba, and Fournier 2007.
- 4 Scott 1998, 5.
- 5 Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001; Manning 1988 and Young 1994.
- 6 Young 1994, 160.
- 7 See Mamdani 1996, 2001b; Migdal 1988; Posner 2003; Ranger 1983; Young 1976.
- 8 Mamdani 2001a.
- 9 Berman 1997; Migdal 1988.
- 10 Eckstein 1975, Rogowski 2004.
- 11 Cohen 1969; Gutkind 1970.
- 12 Anderson 1991; Worby 1994. See also Allen 1996; Harries 1988; Southall 1985.
- 13 Berman 1998; Iliffe 1979; Mamdani 1996; Posner 2003.
- 14 Berman 1998, 339; Karlström 2004.
- 15 Chabal and Daloz 1999.
- 16 Young 1994, 234. Also see Lentz 2000; Ranger 1993.
- 17 Chabal and Daloz 1999, 57.
- 18 Doyle 2006.
- 19 Berkeley to The Marquis of Salisbury, 19 Nov. 1896 (Public Record Office [henceforth PRO] CO 536/1789). In early colonial times the British, using Swahili grammar, referred to Buganda as Uganda and the Baganda as Waganda.
- 20 Crawford to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 2 July 1957 (PRO CO 822/1738); Beattie 1971, 86
- 21 Proceedings of the Uganda Legislative Assembly, November 16, 1955, 25.
- 22 Crawford to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 28 July 1959 (PRO CO 822/1739).
- 23 Sathyamurthy 1986, 254.
- 24 Memo by Hon. N.K. Rugemwa, Representative Member for North Mubende, to Uganda Constitutional Conference, September 23, 1961 (PRO CO 822/2786).
- 25 Winyi 1958, 26.
- 26 Alba and Nee 2003.
- 27 In 1961 the MBC somewhat melodramatically claimed that “the way we are treated by the Buganda Government chiefs . . . is very much more terrible than in 1900. We are now literally enslaved” (MBC memorandum to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 13 September 1961; PRO CO 822/2786).
- 28 Crawford to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 28 July 1957 (PRO CO 822/1739).
- 29 Karugire 1980, 206.
- 30 Crawford to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 2 July 1957 (PRO CO 822/1738).
- 31 Molson Commission 1962, 12.
- 32 Winyi 1958, 26. Legislative Assembly member YB Walukamba also recorded this complaint (Proceedings of the Uganda Legislative Assembly, 16 November 1955, p. 30).
- 33 Molson Commission, 13.
- 34 Molson Commission, 14.
- 35 House of Commons Hansard, 6 May 1957, pp. 738–739.
- 36 Winyi 1958, 24.
- 37 East Africa High Commission 1950.
- 38 Crawford to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 8 July 1959 (PRO CO 822/1739).
- 39 Protectorate of Uganda 1961.
- 40 Government of Buganda 1952, 6; Jamal 1978, 420.
- 41 Government of Buganda 1958, 171–172.
- 42 Munster Commission, 89.
- 43 West 1972, 32.
- 44 Khong 1992; Molson Commission, 11.
- 45 Green 2005, 198.
- 46 The 1921 Census, the only colonial census to record such information, noted that the Banyoro men represented 13.1% of the total male population in Buganda but held 14.6% of government posts. See Protectorate of Uganda 1921.
- 47 Crawford to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 8 July 1959 (PRO CO 822/1739).
- 48 Wrigley 1996.
- 49 Mamdani 2001b, 163. These immigrants should be distinguished from the Rwandan refugees who came to Uganda between 1959 and 1973; many of these refugees stayed in refugee camps in south-west Uganda and largely failed to integrate into Ugandan society. As a result many of them, unlike the immigrants, returned home with the RPF invasion of 1990. See Mamdani 2001b, 162–164; Newbury 2005, 267–270.
- 50 For the sake of simplicity I leave out a discussion of Bulemezi and Singo districts here, neither of which was wholly part of Bunyoro in the pre-colonial era.

- 51 Molson Commission, 8; Interview with Kibaale District Secretary of Finance and Planning John Baptist Sentoogo Amooti, Kibaale, August 9, 2005.
- 52 Buganda Annual Report for 1907–08 (Uganda National Archives [henceforth UNA] A44/255).
- 53 Fortt 1954, 117.
- 54 The 2002 Ugandan census was the first to ever record the Baruli as a recognized ethnic group.
- 55 Interview with John Baptist Sentoogo Amooti.
- 56 Interview with MP Margaret Komuhangi (Women, Nakasongola), Kampala, November 27, 2001. Nakasongola District Chairman Christopher Bagonza similarly claimed that “Buruli is neither in Buganda nor in Bunyoro but is independent” ([Kampala] *New Vision*, August 23, 2004).
- 57 See also MP Daniel Kiwilabye (Kiboga East)’s statement to Parliament that “the people of Buwekula . . . are very happy and they have never made any petition anywhere; even during the constitutional making process” (Proceedings of the Uganda National Assembly, 17 May 2005).
- 58 One hundred Banyoro were reported to have fled Buyaga county between 1900 and 1902 as the Baganda chiefs were “treating them somewhat as serfs;” see Roberts 1962, 197. However, it is just as likely that Banyoro migrated to Bunyoro and Toro at the time due to the relatively high poll taxes in Mubende district: in 1911 one British official noted that “the population of Buyaga is naturally of an unstable and migratory character, . . . [and] until the tax in Toro and Unyoro is raised to Rs.5 no real remedy for this state of affairs will be found.” See the Monthly Report for Mubende District, 7 March 1911 (UNA A46/662). As noted above, by 1929 these taxes had been reduced to the same or lower than surrounding areas.
- 59 Fortt 1954, 94–95, 112.
- 60 Doyle 1998, 34; Ingham 1953, 139; Uzoigwe 1972, 436.
- 61 Doyle 2006, pp. 177–179; Winyi 1948, 15; Ingham 1953, 145; Munster Commission 1961, 89.
- 62 Beattie 1971, 84.
- 63 Wrigley 1996, 23, 219. MSM Kiwanuka writes that “a detailed history of Buddu suggests that it was never effectively ruled by Bunyoro and the clans were almost autonomous paying only nominal allegiance to Bunyoro, except when Bunyoro was strong enough to exact tribute.” See Kiwanuka 1968b, 46.
- 64 Cohen 1977, 76–77; Crawford to Secretary of State for the Colonies Alan L. Boyd, 8 July 1959 (PRO CO 822/1739); Jenkins 1939; Kiwanuka 1968a, 614; Milton Obote to Sir Frederick Crawford, November 28, 1959 (PRO CO 822/1739).
- 65 Beattie 1971, 254.
- 66 Ingham 1953.

- 67 Smith 1991, 9.
- 68 Toft 2003, 23.
- 69 See for instance Fearon 2003; Vanhanen 1999.
- 70 Crawford to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 8 July 1959 (PRO CO 822/1739).
- 71 Green 2007.
- 72 Toft 2003.
- 73 Berman 1998, 313.
- 74 Young 1994, 234.
- 75 Armstrong 1982; Hastings 1997; Smith 1991.
- 76 Englebert 2000.
- 77 Lamphere 2007, Schnell 2000.
- 78 Government of Australia 1997.
- 79 Doty 2007.

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