“Two Tonnes of Excavated Potsherds”
Reflections on State Formation in
Western Uganda

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“Two tonnes of excavated potsherds are unlikely to tell us anything of the origins and character of the semi-mythical Bacwezi dynasty” – Graham Connah in Antiquity 1991, p.480.

Some Theories to Explain the Bacwezi:

Rulers of “a loosely organized empire” (Ogot 1984) with its capital at Bigo

Rulers of several small, perhaps contemporaneous, chiefdoms (Tantala 1989, inter alia)

Spirit mediums (often women) whose activities served as foci of resistance to the later Nyoro kingdom (Berger 1981)

Spirits/spirit mediums associated with shrine sites whose roots lie deep in the EIA (Urewe) and are linked to iron-working and fertility (Schmidt 1978, 2006, inter alia).


Schmidt, P.R. 2006. Historical Archaeology in Africa: Representation, Social Memory, and Oral Traditions. AltaMira Press.
Cwezi sites, particularly Mubende Hill, were ritual centers. These centers date to about the 13th-14th centuries AD. They represent centers where leaders of small polities sought to attract followers by control of ritual knowledge (creative power). They are linked particularly with agriculture and perhaps women. They occur during a period of drier, variable climates. The major earthworks (Bigo, Munsa, Kibengo) occur later.


Recent Criticism of My Interpretation

- I ignore a substantial EIA occupation at Mubende Hill
- I mostly ignored the ritual significance of the site, a center of fertility rituals and symbolism
- My surveys in the region were poorly designed with the result that I failed to find many EIA sites
- I am obsessed with useless Western theories of state formation

Mubende Hill

Is there a substantial EIA occupation?

A re-examination of the excavated potsherds identified 79 EIA/Urewe sherds (not vessels) in an assemblage of ~20,000 sherds

Did I ignore the ritual significance of the site?

I suggested that it may have been a ritual center in the 13th/14th century in my first summary of the excavations (Robertshaw 1988) and I have consistently mentioned this in my writings drawing attention to the likely importance of women and agriculture.

Is there EIA material at other known Cwezi sites in this region?

Kasunga is the only other excavated Cwezi shrine –
The birthplace of Ndongura, who later moved to Mubende Hill


Kasunga
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<td><strong>Earliest date?</strong></td>
<td>Several dates from different parts of the site put earliest occupation in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century AD</td>
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<td><strong>EIA/Urewe pottery?</strong></td>
<td>~100,000 excavated sherds; not a single EIA sherd identified</td>
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Robertshaw, P. In prep. Excavations at Kasunga.
Missed EIA sites?

Perhaps, but….

Graham Connah found no EIA exploitation of salt at Kibiro.

Historical linguistics indicate major expansion of people into this region in the early 2nd millennium AD.

“In western Uganda…only from ~AD1000 are there clear indications of widespread primary forest clearance” (Ssemmanda et al. 2005:119)


Am I obsessed with theories of state formation?

Yes…..

And no…..


No…. Tantala makes much of the importance of the Cwezi shrines as political centers. Also Lanning in interviews conducted in 1953-5 was told by local informants that Mubende developed first as a political center. Drums, symbols of political authority, were part of the site’s regalia. All the traditions and oral histories, as remembered by Banyoro, emphasize the political and often military significance of the Bacwezi. Ignoring this fact to focus solely on the ritual significance of sites like Mubende Hill is just as much a denial of Africa’s past as would be a blinkered focus on state formation.
It’s better to be criticized than ignored….I think…

Building on the criticism…..

Two topics to explore:
1) The nature of EIA/Urewe sites in Bunyoro

Small numbers of sherds

Often found in or very near rockshelters – this doesn’t seem to be a product of erosional/depositional processes or poor archaeological survey techniques

Pre-Cwezi (*musaza*) priests associated with sacred caves (Tantala 1989:557)

2) The past was important in the past

Munsa appears to be have been one of the first settlements in the region (~9th/10th century)

Is that one or the major reason why the earthworks were dug there rather than somewhere else?

Mubende Hill was originally known by another name (Kisozi) and likely was the center of a pre-Cwezi cult

For Bunyoro-Kitara, a pre-Cwezi (EIA/Urewe?) religious complex or complexes (cults) involving caves, wells, and pythons

The Cwezi, therefore, are not associated with the EIA/Urewe, but there is a pre-Cwezi cult or cults that may be associated with the EIA. Pre-Cwezi cult suggested by the alleged ability of the Nyakahuma to turn into a snake and swim in the sacred well at the new moon. Roscoe recorded traditions of a special temple at Kisengwe (Kasunga) where a priest lived with a python and fed it milk (Tantala 1989:600). Python cults around L. Victoria “part of an ideational set that combines python gods with rain-making, fertility and spirit possession” (Tantala, p.613). In Kisengwe area before the Cwezi arrival, “two competing nodes of ritual-cum-political authority: the Gaba line of musaza priests and the Ranzi family which controlled the python cult” (Tantala, p.632).

“The source of power resides in the interaction between natural, social, and supernatural realms” (Arens and Karp 1989:xvii) – caves are at the interface between these realms.

SUMMARY

Cwezi sites were probably important ritual and political centers during the second millennium AD.

The "semi-mythical" Bacwezi in Bunyoro are probably not directly associated with EIA/Urewe.

Urewe presence in Bunyoro in 1st millennium AD – small numbers of sherds often associated with rockshelters.

EIA/Urewe more likely to be associated with one (two?) pre-Cwezi cults associated with rockshelters and pythons, possibly of pan-Great Lakes distribution.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- Graham Connah for publishing full site reports
- Peter Schmidt, Andrew Reid, John Sutton, Merrick Posnansky, David Schoenbrun and many others whose criticisms and ideas have irked, goaded and inspired me for many years
- British Institute in Eastern Africa, NSF and National Geographic Society for support of fieldwork
- National Endowment for the Humanities for research support
- Ephraim Kamuhangire, Andrew Reid, David Taylor and many others for support and collaboration in and out of the field
- Detlef Gronenborn and Scott MacEachern for inviting me to participate in this session of the conference