

Kasubi Tombs: Reconstruction of a World Heritage Site in Uganda²¹

Clara Himmelheber
Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum Cologne, Germany

Abstract

The theme of this article is the negotiations between different actors which took place during the course of the reconstruction of the world heritage site of Kasubi Tombs after the tombs had been destroyed by fire in 2010. It shows the overlapping as well as competing interests of the stakeholders and touches on currently much debated and highly contested concepts such as authenticity and heritage.

Introduction

In 2001, Kasubi Tombs in Buganda²² were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. According to the homepage of the UNESCO, the tombs are both ‘the major spiritual centre’, and ‘the most active religious place’ in the Buganda kingdom (UNESCO 2015a).

On 16 March 2010 Kasubi was destroyed by fire. The fire and the subsequent reconstruction of the tombs led to new dynamics between the following actors, who are – in one way or another – involved in the reconstruction of Kasubi:

- The monarchists under Kabaka Mutebi are split into two parties: the ‘custodians of tradition’ who stay and/or work in the royal tombs and the ‘modern monarchists’ who are entrusted with the organisation of the reconstruction of Kasubi.
- The UNESCO administers the international World Heritage Programme through the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. It not only follows the reconstruction through expert delegations, but also finances major parts of the project.
- The Ugandan Government under President Museveni has a difficult relationship to the monarchists, but as a state party it is the official negotiating partner of the UNESCO for the reconstruction.

²¹ The field research in January 2013 for this article was kindly supported by the Museumsgesellschaft RJM. I would also like to thank the Director of the Institute for Peace and Strategic Studies at Gulu University for accepting me as an affiliate researcher.

²² Nomenclature: The region is called Buganda, the people are called Baganda (singular Muganda), the language is Luganda and in English texts the form for adjectives and adverbs is Bugandan, even if this is grammatically incorrect.

- Further donors such as the Baganda in the diaspora, the tourism industry and the Asian Community of Uganda each have different motives for supporting the kingdom.
- Born Again Christians (*Balokole*) are betwixt and between condemning and supporting the kingdom.

The following pages give an insight into the different motives and strategies of these various actors in the process of negotiating the reconstruction of Kasubi and the different problems occurring in the course of the reconstruction.

Monarchists: Social Capital versus Political Influence

The Baganda in Uganda supported the reconstruction of Kasubi by donating money and material such as cement for the building and grass for the roofing. Furthermore, they helped clean up after the fire and some of them are involved in the reconstruction itself. However, the monarchists themselves are not a homogenous group, but split into the so-called ‘custodians of tradition’ and the representatives of the Royal Parliament (*lukiiiko*) who call themselves ‘modern monarchists’.²³ Between these two monarchist groups there is repeated potential for conflict.

The custodians of tradition inherit their duties from their ancestors. They comprise the leaders of the Bugandan clans and the people in charge of producing and looking after the traditional items of regalia. In the surroundings of the royal tombs these are mainly women – the wives and sisters of the deceased Kabaka. These are hereditary offices, so there are wives of a Kabaka who passed away 200 years ago. Other hereditary offices such as clan heads or producers of royal objects are usually held by men.

Many of the custodians of tradition have only very little Western education. They gain status and self-confidence through the secret knowledge connected to their royal duties. One might call this self-promotion or a ‘reciprocal construction of value’ (Appadurai 1986: 20): the custodian defines the importance of his duty for the kingdom amongst other things through the secret knowledge attached to it and the importance of the duty defines the ‘value’ (i.e. status) of the custodian. Claiming that one is responsible for an important duty requiring lots of secret knowledge raises one’s own status (Mayer-Himmelheber 2004: 26).

The custodians of tradition look down contemptuously on the representatives of the second monarchist group: the members of the Royal Parliament. Officially, the Kabaka only has cultural functions, but he appoints his own government. His ministers and the members of his parliament form the ‘modern monarchists’. They gain unofficial power by broadcasting their resolutions on the royal radio station CBS or, during the first phase of my research (1998-99), by publishing them in the royal newspaper Njuba Times – two important instruments for the kingdom to promote itself. The interest of the modern monarchists is often directed less at monarchical traditions than at politics. In terms of Kasubi they are mainly interested in the preservation of the tombs for the public – Baganda, Ugandans and international tourists.

While many modern monarchists hold the views of the traditional custodians as antiquated and superstitious, the traditional custodians in turn repeatedly state that they are the real rulers in the royal tombs, whereas the rights of the modern monarchists are limited. For example, the modern monarchists, in contrast to the traditional custodians, are not allowed in the secret part of

²³ Reluctantly, I use the terms ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ since they are a self-designation by the actors and this dichotomy was crucial in my informants’ discourse.

the tomb – the forest – as mentioned in the following dialogue between a custodian of tradition and a modern monarchist who is employed as a guard by the Royal Government to work in the royal tombs:

L.: *You have to be born to work for the king, otherwise you can't force it.*

R.: *Do you mean that I have been born to work in the royal tombs?*

L.: *Ha no, you work for external duties. I told you that no one is allowed to enter the forest. You only serve to welcome tourists who come to see the tombs. I have no boundaries, I go anywhere in the tombs.*

(B.L. and P.R., 11 March 1999)²⁴

In the 1990s, though, before the declaration of Kasubi as World Heritage Site, the power of the custodians of tradition appeared to dwindle. The guard employed by the Royal Parliament, for example, said a problem with the traditional custodians was that they went to the Royal Parliament to ask for cows, goats, chicken, bark cloth and building materials to make a royal twin object (*mulongo*). However, when the accountant of the Royal Parliament asked what they really needed all these things for, they replied that they could not say, because it was secret. If as a result they did not get anything, because one cannot book 'secret' in the account books, they felt they were not being taken seriously. (P.R., 9 September 1999).

After the fire at Kasubi, the status of the custodians of tradition was upgraded by the UNESCO.

UNESCO: Authenticity, the Intangible and the Problem of Secrecy

The Rise of the Intangible

The royal tombs of Kasubi were built in 1881, originally as a palace for Kabaka Mutesa I.²⁵ They are situated on a terrain of around 270,000m². In close vicinity to the actual burial site, there are additional buildings in which the carers of the royal tombs live and royal objects are stored.²⁶ In another area there is a whole settlement which includes agricultural land and a larger cemetery for distant royal family members. The actual burial site of the last four Kabaka²⁷ 'Muzibu Azaala Mpanga' is (or was) a large circular building, 7.5 metres high and 31 metres in diameter. Like all royal tombs, Kasubi consists of two parts, one that is open to the public and a second which is separated by a curtain of bark cloth (*lubugo*) and a barrier of spears. This part of the tomb, called

²⁴ I anonymised my informants' statements as long as they were not official statements made by public figures.

²⁵ According to Ray, today there are 23 royal tombs in Buganda (Ray 1972: 35) but they are not as spectacular as Kasubi.

²⁶ For a detailed description of the royal tombs, see Oliver 1959, Ray 1991, Kigongo 1991.

²⁷ The correct term for a deceased Kabaka is Ssekabaka. However, to improve readability, I will call a deceased Kabaka also Kabaka.

‘the forest’ (*kibira*), is not accessible to the public. It is the place where the spirits of the royal ancestors reside.²⁸

After the destruction of Kasubi in 2010 much of the money for the reconstruction of the royal tombs came from the UNESCO, mainly from Japan. An important question for the UNESCO after the fire was whether Kasubi still fulfilled the criteria of a World Heritage Site. Was it still ‘authentic’ in its unique features?

In the late 1990s – during the process of enlisting Kasubi as a world cultural heritage site – the UNESCO was especially interested in the preservation of the architectural elements of Kasubi. From 2010 onwards, in discussions about the reconstruction of the ‘intangible aspects’ of Kasubi, the rituals increasingly came to the fore.

What was the background for this change in strategy? On the one hand the politics of the UNESCO had changed. In Europe, with its ‘built for eternity’ architecture, many more World Heritage Sites have been appointed than in Africa, where a lot of buildings do not have such a long history. In the last few decades there has been a growing interest in intangible cultural heritage in order to reduce this bias in favour of European heritage sites (Duvellé 2013: 8). In 2003, therefore, the ‘Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage’ was adopted. It comprises dance, theatre, music, oral traditions, festivals and other cultural manifestations and expressions (UNESCO 2003). As a result, in 2008, for example, the making of bark cloth in Uganda was listed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. In the years 2006-2009, the UNESCO implemented a safeguarding project in order to ‘popularize the making and use of bark cloth’. This led to an increasing interest in bark cloth in Uganda (UNESCO 2015b).

On the other hand, in the case of Kasubi, one is under pressure to justify why Kasubi should remain on the list of World Heritage Sites, as the tombs – the *material* cultural heritage – burned down.²⁹ The intangible is the only thing that is still ‘authentic’. The reports on the reconstruction focus therefore on the intangible strengths of Kasubi.

The Committee noted that the site combines the historical and spiritual values of a nation. It was a specific achievement of the November 2010 Joint Monitoring Mission to elevate recognition of the intangible dimension of the Kasubi heritage site, and to indicate that this dimension influences every decision made regarding the reconstruction of the material remains, and that deliberations on the property must bear witness to this reality. (Lisitzin & Bakker 2012: 7)

This focus on ‘intangibles’ strengthened the status of the custodians of tradition who in recent decades had been increasingly marginalised. Now they are the ones who are knowledgeable about the ‘intangible aspects’ of Kasubi, about the reconstruction and the associated rituals. The UNESCO sees enhancing the status of the custodians of tradition as central for Kasubi to be taken off the list of ‘World Heritage Sites in Danger’:

²⁸ The term ‘forest’ derives from a legend according to which Kabaka Kintu, the legendary founder of the kingdom of Buganda, did not die but disappeared in a forest (Kigongo 1991: 3, Ray 1991: 7).

²⁹ The delegation came to the following conclusion: ‘Although the authenticity of the site has been weakened by the loss to the fire of the main tomb structure, the traditional architectural craftsmanship and the required skills are still available to allow it to be recreated. This factor, (...) coupled with the extensive documentation of the building, will allow an authentic renewal of attributes’ (Lisitzin & Bakker 2012: 7-9).

The increase in status of the custodians and the steady progress on the Reconstruction Project, augers [sic] well for the site to be taken off the List of World Heritage Sites in Danger in the future when all the adopted corrective measures and recommendations presented in this report are adhered to. (Lisitzin & Bakker 2012: 7)

Moreover, two traditional monarchists were chosen to assist the architect with their knowledge.³⁰ And finally in 2012 spirit mediums decided that the royal tomb of Kabaka Ssuna³¹ in Wamala had to be renovated before one could start reconstructing Kasubi:

The spirit mediums informed the National Technical Committee that, not only is the beginning of reconstruction at Wamala a prerequisite for the start of work at Kasubi, but that [the] two projects belong together as one. (Lisitzin & Bakker 2012: 32)

This means a huge change in status of the traditional monarchists. In the late 1990s they were almost powerless against the modern monarchists, and now spirit mediums – traditional monarchists – dictate when and how the reconstruction of Kasubi has to take place and the Technical Committee bows to their orders! The growing power of the traditional monarchists harbours considerable potential for conflict with the modern monarchists and the UNESCO itself, for example concerning issues such as ‘authenticity’ and ‘secrecy’.

Conflicting Concepts of Authenticity

‘Authenticity’ is one of the key concepts for the UNESCO in the legitimisation of a site as World Heritage Site. But there are ‘culturally different ideas about the nature of authenticity’ not only in connection with souvenirs from Africa as Phillips and Steiner asserted (1999: 4), but also in the context of the royal tombs in Buganda.

The twin object (*mulongo*)³² of Kabaka Ssuna from the royal tomb in Wamala is one example. Around the year 1900, a group of royal objects from this tomb – including a royal twin object – found its way into British museums.³³ In the royal tomb in Wamala they were replaced by new objects. The traditional custodians of Wamala see the twin object of Kabaka Ssuna as a living being which is not accessible to the public. For them, the twin object in England – from a

³⁰ ‘The use of mediums and the appointment of two ‘bearers’ [of indigenous/traditional knowledge] from the kingdom to assist the architect in recording and understanding traditional facets of the reconstruction is vital to integrate pragmatic and spiritual aspects of the project. In this project the 1st King has the last word.’ (Lisitzin & Bakker 2012: 30)

³¹ Kabaka Ssuna is the father of Kabaka Mutesa I, who was the first to be buried in Kasubi.

³² In Uganda twins are considered blessed with special powers. They receive special names, twin ceremonies are held in their honour and special twin objects (singular: *mulongo* / plural: *balongo*) are made. Members of the royal family are considered per se to be born with a twin, and thus as equipped with special powers. Their umbilical cord is kept in a twin object that accompanies its living counterpart throughout life. When a Kabaka passes away, it is believed that his soul merges with his twin object – the twin objects are considered living, acting beings (Mayer-Himmelheber 2004: 151ff).

³³ The objects were presumably brought in 1900 by Rev. John Roscoe to the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the British Museum in London. Roscoe seems to have received them as gifts from the Bugandan Royal Prime Minister Apolo Kagga, according to a letter from A.K. Mayanja, Minister of Education at the Royal Parliament at that time, to the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University in 1961 (Archives of the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology). For the biographies of Roscoe and Kagga and their relationship, see Ray 1991: 23ff.

Western perspective the original, the authentic object – is uninteresting, because the spirit of the Kabaka has left this shell and has entered into the new *mulongo* stored in Wamala. The latter, therefore, is for them the original / authentic object.

In contrast to the traditional monarchists, modern monarchists regard the twin object from Ssuna's tomb currently in England as the original, authentic object, whereas they see the twin object, which is today stored in Ssuna's tomb at Wamala, as only an inferior copy. In general, they do not consider the royal twin objects as living beings, but as cultural assets worth protecting. They propagate that the royal twin objects in general should be accommodated at a scheduled-to-be-built Buganda Museum in a display case according to conservation requirements. And they should not be sacrificed to as the women in the royal tombs do (Mayer-Himmelheber 2004: 165ff).

Another example of conflicting views of authenticity is the roof pitch of Muzibu Azaala Mpanga at Kasubi. After the fire, a Japanese UNESCO Commission of experts for grass roofs visited Kasubi. They noted that the roof slope at Kasubi was lower than in all other parts of the world:

The roof pitch in Japan is generally 47 to 60 degrees, 50 to 60 degrees in Europe, and in Southeast Asia it can be steeper close to 70 degrees. The pitch of the roof surface is normally less steep than the roof foundation, in Japan being 45 to 50 degrees.

The roof pitch of the Kasubi Tombs is around 45 degrees, which is lesser [sic] than in other regions of the world. The roof pitch directly affects the durability period of the roof, so if the roof pitch is transformed towards 50 degrees, the durability may improve.

(Nitto, Furukawa & Hasegawa 2011: 24)³⁴

A flat pitch leads to a faster decay of the roof as rainwater cannot run off properly. A reconstruction on the basis of old photographs shows that the roof of Kasubi was originally much more inclined (Eloundou *et al.* 2010: 53-58). The plan is to rebuild the roof more inclined than it was in recent years in order to heighten its conservational standard (Eloundou *et al.* 2010: 23). In this way it will come closer to the original state of the roof at around 1900. But one of the Bugandan experts involved in cultural heritage posed the question:

They were suggesting that they should go back to the 1913 design which was a bit sharper compared to the roof that slumped. So how about the people who are used to see Kasubi as it was before the roof slumped, who never used to see the 1913 design. Because sometimes authenticity and originality is in people's imaginations. So do you think those people will look at Kasubi as original? [For them] it will be a replica or something. (K.S., 17 January 2013)

The Power of Secrecy

Another problem touches on the question of secrecy. A good example is again the royal twin objects (*balongo*): There were probably over a hundred twin objects of royal family members in the secret rear area of Kasubi. After the fire, the UNESCO wanted to catalogue all the twin objects,

³⁴According to other sources, in 2006 the roof pitch of Kasubi was only 32-39% (Eloundou *et al.* 2010: 58).

to restore the damaged ones and to renew the ones destroyed by the fire. However, when asked about the objects and their documentation by external experts, the traditional custodians acted as if they were totally unaware of the documentation project. They refused to answer questions about the number of objects, their condition or whereabouts as shown in one of the UNESCO reports:

The twin's [sic] objects were not documented because of misunderstandings from the members of the royal family and wives at Kasubi Tombs. The custodians were not aware of the purpose to document the artefacts. This created tension amongst the custodians at Kasubi Tombs.

Therefore, there is a need to sensitize the custodians and the stakeholder on the current best conservation principles and disaster risk management.

(Kayima, Kalanzi & Kigongo 2012: 10)

What is the background for this refusal by the traditional monarchists? It is the fear of abandoning their secret knowledge. The traditional custodians cannot divulge their secret knowledge to the UNESCO and the modern monarchists, because it constitutes their status, their social capital. Peter Probst has pointedly formulated a similar problem in the sacred grove of Osogbo, Nigeria, with the following question: 'How does the demand for visibility and publicity go together with interests in secrecy and concerns about loss of control?' (Probst 2011: 11).

In the case of Kasubi, the question of secrecy culminated in the demand of the traditional monarchists to build everything by themselves: The argument of 'secrecy' initially served as an argument against an international tender for the reconstruction. This argument was accepted and a Bugandan construction company was awarded the contract. Later, the argument of 'secrecy' was also directed against Bugandan companies as contractors since they were also not traditional custodians, but were assigned by the modern monarchists. And the rejection by the traditional monarchists goes even further. It is also directed against the UNESCO in general. The fear of getting expropriated even goes as far as to label the whole 'reconstruction according to UNESCO standards a "dictatorship"' (Maseruka 2010), as was done by the monarchist group 'Abazukulu Ba Buganda'.

For some members of both monarchist groups the intention to declare Kasubi a World Heritage Site in the late 1990s had already been accompanied by the fear of a second expropriation. The first expropriation had taken place after the abolition of the kingdoms in 1966/67, when the royal tombs were placed under the Ugandan National Museum until 1993. On the one hand, the Ugandan government provided for the maintenance of the royal tombs and employed an official guardian to take care of the tombs (Moriset 1998: 11-12, Okee 1997: 24, Tumwine 1995: 9). On the other hand, the Ugandan government was restrictive against meetings of Baganda in the royal tombs, as it feared the tombs could be used as a place for a counter-movement by Bugandan monarchists as one of the traditional custodians recounts: 'Army troops came to this place. They [the traditional custodians] couldn't play drums. Obote was afraid that the Baganda could organise and meet here' (P.R.: 30 April 1998). After the reintroduction of the kingdoms in 1993, Kasubi was returned to the Kabaka and the former state custodians are now subordinated to the kingdom.

In 1998 some traditional custodians of the royal tombs raised the concern that the Ugandan State, with which the relationship had been tense ever since the restoration of the kingdom, could regain greater influence in Kasubi, as the UNESCO cooperates with states and not directly with the monarchy. Another concern was that Kasubi as a World Heritage Site would be theoretically

subject to the UNESCO and the Kabaka would not be allowed to make any changes without the consent of the UNESCO. So Kasubi would in some sense be 'expropriated' again: 'There are rumours that the ICOM people are going to take away the [Kasubi] building and change our culture. People in Kasubi tombs are afraid' (P.R., 14 October 1998).

These fears of the monarchists from the 1990s were reinforced after the fire in 2010 by statements such as that of Uganda UNESCO Commission Secretary General, Mr. Augustine Omare Okurut, whose position was reported in a newspaper article: 'The assistance, he said, was to the government because UNESCO works with the states through the national commissions for UNESCO. Buganda, he explained was just custodians of the site' (Mulondo 2010). This statement is factually correct but with regard to the conflicts between monarchists and Ugandan government and assumptions regarding the cause of the fire, it is a sensitive issue. This point opens up a much wider discussion on the top-down approach of the world heritage project in general and on the unequal power relations on the different levels.

Ugandan Government: Negotiating Political Power

In the 1990s, it was the central government which had set the institutional framework of the current kingdom of Buganda. Upon restoring the Ugandan kingdoms³⁵ in 1993, President Yoweri Museveni defined them as purely cultural institutions.³⁶ The restoration of the Buganda kingdom was part of a strategy of Museveni and his central government to win the Bugandan lower- and middle-classes to vote for the new Ugandan constitution. Ever since its restoration, the relations between the Buganda kingdom and the central government have become ever tenser, as the monarchists have been demanding more political rights, such as the collecting of taxes. The fire at Kasubi in March 2010 led to an intensification of the conflict between the monarchists of the kingdom of Buganda and the Ugandan government.

In their article 'The clash of institutions: traditional authority, conflict and the failure of 'hybridity' in Buganda', Goodfellow and Lindemann (2013) convincingly explain why the relationship between the kingdom of Buganda and the Ugandan government has been strained ever since the restitution of the kingdom. They discuss in general the phenomenon of why in some African countries the cooperation between the nation state and so-called traditional authorities – which in the 1990s and 2000s were gaining importance again in many African states – works and why it fails in other countries.

In short, their thesis is that the cooperation is fruitful when the so-called traditional authorities are either integrated into the state structure (Goodfellow & Lindemann 2013: 6) or when they limit themselves to their cultural role and do not compete with the state's functions (Goodfellow & Lindemann 2013: 7). However, the Buganda kingdom takes on certain roles and tasks that the Ugandan state considers its exclusive right, so that in the past it has repeatedly come to conflicts and clashes between the two parties (Goodfellow & Lindemann 2013: 7-8). A point of contention between the kingdom of Buganda and the Ugandan government is decentralisation in Uganda. Like the Bugandan monarchists, Museveni's government strives to decentralise the state. But contrary to the monarchists the Ugandan government does so not along ethnic lines and it does

³⁵ The traditional leaders of Buganda, Toro, Bunyoro and Busoga were reinstated (Kayunga 1995: 244).

³⁶ This limitation re-appeared in the Ugandan constitution of 1995: 'Traditional leaders may exist / are to / shall act in accordance with the culture and wishes of the people (concerned). [...] 3 (v) a traditional leader shall not participate in partisan politics (vi) a traditional leader shall not have administrative, legislative or executive powers of central or local government' (quoted after Mukholi 1995: 77-78).

not want to put Buganda under the control of the Kabaka as the Bugandan monarchists demand in their claim for *federalo* – the Luganda word for federalism (Goodfellow & Lindemann 2013: 12-15). Between 1989 and the year 2000, the number of districts in Uganda rose from 33 to 45. By 2011 there were already 112 districts (von Weichs 2013: 20) – a process Goodfellow and Lindemann call ‘an “epidemic” of district creation’ (Goodfellow & Lindemann 2013: 12). Many monarchists see Museveni’s decentralisation policy as an attempt to weaken their power by fragmenting the kingdom. As one representative of the Royal Parliament stated: ‘Central Government tries to weaken Buganda by creating new chiefdoms’ (J.E., 11 January 2013).

To summarise: According to Goodfellow and Lindemann the cooperation between the Uganda state and the Bugandan monarchists failed ‘because of the tenacity with which the traditional authority clung to institutions based on its powerful past, while the government – threatened by the Kingdom’s popularity and influence – refused to allow those institutions a role in formal government’ (Goodfellow & Lindemann 2013: 21).

In 2009 the situation between the Ugandan government and the monarchists escalated. In September of that year, protests by the monarchists in Kampala turned violent. The royal radio station was closed, so that the Royal Parliament lost its mouthpiece. In this still tense situation, Kasubi burned down in March 2010. The question was and still is: Who was responsible for the fire? Ugandan officials say the fire could have been sparked by the traditional custodians of Kasubi, who while keeping watch in the secret part of the tomb had cooked on an open fire (Khisu 2010). Many monarchists, on the contrary, think that Museveni’s people set the fire as a further measure to weaken the monarchy. The result of the inquiry commission established by the government to investigate the cause of the fire has been available to the Ugandan government since March 2011, but it has not yet been published to date. The publication would certainly be tricky, no matter what the result is.

The day after the fire, President Museveni visited Kasubi before Kabaka Mutebi came to visit the royal tombs. This led to clashes between Museveni’s security forces and the angry crowd that had gathered at Kasubi. In the shootout, three civilians were killed. Each side accused the other of having caused the fatal injuries. The question discussed in the newspapers was whether President Museveni as head of state should have visited Kasubi before Kabaka Mutebi? Some commentators said it was Museveni’s right as head of state to visit Kasubi first as it is a national heritage – but it might not have been very diplomatic of him to do so (Kalinaki 2010). Others draw a comparison to the storming of the royal palace in 1966, which led to the abolition of kingdoms (Littlefield Kasfir 2012: 68).

The trauma of the abolition of the kingdom is shared by members of another group that also donated to the reconstruction of Kasubi: the Baganda in the diaspora.

Baganda in the Diaspora: Heritage for Social Identity, Sense of Belonging and Political Opposition

An important group of Bugandan supporters of the kingdom does not live in Uganda itself but is scattered around the world – the Baganda in the diaspora. Many Baganda were forced to leave the country during the times of Milton Obote and Idi Amin – they mainly migrated to Britain, the US and Sweden. By the end of the 20th century about 250,000 Baganda lived in the diaspora (Anonymus 1998). They are potent donors and supporters of the Buganda kingdom. Like other communities in the diaspora, they tend to be more conservative, i.e. more conscious of their traditions and in this case stronger monarchists than many of their fellow countrymen at home. As

Peter Probst puts it: ‘Under conditions of colonial experience and forced migration, heritage can become a powerful signifier of social identity and a people’s desire to shape their own future’ (Probst 2011: 7). For many members of the Bugandan diaspora, the kingdom is a means of self-definition. A Muganda in Britain commented on his situation as follows: ‘You must have your culture and your nation and then other people will respect you; and otherwise you are a third class person’ (P.B., 01 September 1998). Many Baganda in the diaspora are also long-standing critics of Museveni, as sources from the Royal Parliament noted: ‘The Diaspora can speak freely and criticise the Central Government and the way they treat Kabaka’ (J.E., 11 January 2013). Some of them administer extremely aggressive websites, which denounce Museveni’s behaviour towards the monarchy.

In March 2010 the diaspora announced that it would donate one million U.S. dollars to the reconstruction of Kasubi (Ssenkabirwa & Mwanje 2010).³⁷

Tourism Industry: Kasubi as Unique Selling Point

Funds for the reconstruction of Kasubi also came, among others, from tourism companies, which denote Kasubi as a ‘unique selling point’ (Muhumuza 2010). The tourism industry lost one of its main attractions in Kampala in the fire, which also means a great financial loss:

The destruction of Kasubi tombs, a world heritage site, left many sharing the grief of our lost heritage. From the tourism industry, it was a similar story. Fresh from marketing (B)uganda at international tourism fairs, through press trips and promotions, tour operators who had packaged Kasubi tombs on the Kampala City tour circuit, are now grappling over how to repackage the city tour without Kasubi tombs. (Ofungi 2010)

The importance of Kasubi for tourism is also shown in the fact that it is subordinated to the ‘Royal Ministry for Royal Tombs, Heritage and Tourism’ (Lisitzin & Bakker 2012: 48).

Heritage: a Booming Concept

Heritage is an important factor not only for tourism but in general there is a real commercial boom in heritage. According to Zoë Strother

This is the moment when ‘tradition’ is metamorphosing into ‘heritage’ in the literature on Africa. Through the model of ‘world heritage,’ the UNESCO is forging the universalism demanded by international institutions by providing a template to negotiate local differences within a global matrix. In the process, ‘heritage’ is transformed from a tool articulating national identities to one assuring global interconnectivity.’ (Strother 2012: 1)

Peter Probst defines heritage as ‘a contemporary form of cultural production, i.e. a form that is directed towards the past but is produced in the present’ (Probst 2012: 11). There are heritage

³⁷ A group of non-Baganda in the diaspora also donated to the reconstruction (Monitor Reporter 2010).

trails for tourists in Uganda and heritage clubs for pupils in schools as well as heritage camps. These various heritage products are offered by different distributors.

Since 2007 the Nabagereka, wife of the Kabaka, has been organising an annual *Ekisaakaate*, a two-week holiday programme for children, where she teaches Bugandan customs and traditions – in 2013 e.g. according to the motto ‘Re-awakening African Values for Posterity’ (Wanyenze 2013). The programme faced similar objections by the Ugandan government, traditional monarchists and Born Again Christians as the reconstruction of Kasubi. This is indicated in a passage of the publication ‘*Ekisaakaate: Reconciling Traditional and Modern Gender Values*’:

Negative attitude towards the programme – In its initial stages, some government officials were opposed to a traditional institution grooming children, suspecting indoctrination and fostering rebellion through the children. The Ekisaakaate became the object of subtle security surveillance but, with time, fears were dispelled. Secondly, some traditionalists within the kingdom and the community stated a preference to have this programme exclusively for Baganda children. A negative perception of culture as ‘satanic’ has also surfaced: some religions [sic] groups (mainly ABalokole – ‘saved’ Christians) have linked learning about traditional values to learning about traditional worship and witchcraft, an accusation that the Ekisaakaate Executive Committee has deliberately not responded to, allowing parents’ and students’ testimonies to speak for themselves. (The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda 2009: 10)

In another kind of heritage camp, the Catholic Church focuses on Christian moral values.

The Ugandan NGO Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU) works on heritage clubs in schools providing ‘Heritage passports for young people—for them to be able to record their identities’ (K.S., 17 January 2013). In 2013, CCFU organised the 15th International Conference of National Trusts: ‘Our heritage, Our Future: Cultural diversity for Responsible Development’ (Entebbe, Uganda, 30 September – 04 October 2013). The Uganda Voluntary Development Association (UVDA), as a member organisation of the Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service (CCIVS), holds international work camps for ‘World Heritage Volunteers’ at Kasubi. The campaign is coordinated by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre in cooperation with the CCIVS. There are plans to also involve members of Ugandan heritage clubs in the work camps (B.S: 17.1.2013).

Unlike heritage clubs which target the Ugandan youth and work camps which try to bring together local and international youth, a third form of heritage projects – heritage trails – targets international tourists: The Uganda Museum plans different heritage trails, e.g. on rock art sites, slave trade, the Bacwezi and the Ugandan Martyrs (Rose Mbowa, Commissioner, Department of Museums and Monuments, 18 January 2013). A ‘Kabaka’s Trail’ has been set up by the Kabaka Foundation (Kabaka Foundation 2015).

To quote Peter Probst: ‘[T]he celebration of heritage has become a major factor in the cultural economies of many African states today. A heritage fever has set in. With the help of supranational agencies like the UNESCO, heritage has become a new technology, preserving and

safeguarding the present past' (Probst 2012: 10).³⁸ The booming interest in heritage was the reason for the tourism industry to support the reconstruction of Kasubi. But there are other stakeholders who in turn donate to the reconstruction of the royal tombs for other reasons.

Asian Community of Uganda: Aiming for Security

Since colonial times, the Asian community of Uganda has been an important factor in the Ugandan economy (Mickleburgh 1999).³⁹ In the 1990s, the Asian community in Uganda was one of the major donors to the Buganda kingdom. For example, Kasubi was restored at the expense of a Ugandan member of the Asian community prior to it being listed as a world cultural heritage site (Kibugwe 1999: 4). Asked for his motivation in sponsoring the kingdom in general, the Asian sponsor stated his close relation to the kingdom: 'My financial donation (...) is due to the love for Kabakaship and the kingdom at large. The Asian community and I enjoy close cooperation with the people in the kingdom and the country at large' (Ruparelia in Kakande 1999). The Baganda on the other hand tend to believe that financial gain and not love for the kingdom is the Asians' strongest motive. For example, another Asian businessman was the main donor to the coronation. He sponsored the Kabaka's outfit including the regalia as well as the royal wedding outfit some years later. He was also the official royal photographer at the coronation and was suspected to have earned a lot of money in that position (D.W., 23 November 1998). But there is also an ulterior motive, rarely mentioned by anyone: the fear of the Asian community of being expelled from the country, as in 1972 under the regime of Idi Amin. One informant characterised the Asian sponsor of Kabaka Mutebi's regalia as follows: 'This guy is lucky. No one will ever touch him. It was a clever idea [to sponsor the regalia], because anybody who touches him now touches the kingship' (N.R., 26 November 1998). This shows the power of the kingdom within the Ugandan national state: the Baganda are seen as influential enough to expel the Asians and the Kabaka is perceived as powerful enough to protect them in case of danger, whereas officially he does not have any political power.

According to a statement from sources within the Royal Parliament, members of the Asian community also donated to the reconstruction of Kasubi. But they were not as open in appearance as they had been at the coronation and wedding of the Kabaka in the 1990s. One reason might be that supporting the monarchy today would be seen as an overly open positioning against the Ugandan government. And the members of the Asian community wish to forfeit neither side, as one informant put it: 'They [the members of the Asian community] used to sponsor the kingdom and they still do, but not so open, because that is not opportune because of Central Government' (J.E., 11 January 2013).

Born Again Christians (*Balokole*): Religion Versus Culture

One of the most influential movements in Uganda is the *Balokole*,⁴⁰ a number of different fundamental Christian-oriented groupings, who describe themselves as Born Again Christians

³⁸ For a discussion on the metamorphosis of tradition into heritage see Probst 2012, Strother 2012 and Duvelle 2013.

³⁹ The term 'Asian Community of Uganda' comprises mainly Ugandans originating from the Indian subcontinent, not people of Chinese origin, whose number in Uganda has been increasing in recent years. In 1998 the Asian community comprised an estimated 10,000 people (Mickleburgh 1999).

⁴⁰ Singular: *Mulokole*

(Mugeere 1999). In 1990, more than 100 groups in Kampala ascribed themselves to the *Balokole* (Kalebbo 1998) – and numbers have grown within the last decades. In the beginning, the attitude of these fundamentalist Christians towards the restitution of the Buganda kingdom was restrained. They regarded the kingdom as a traditional institution with unchristian if not satanic implications. And even today they are still split on whether they should support the monarchy or not.

This demonstrates another potential conflict provoked by the new focus of the UNESCO on the ‘intangible’ – by calling Kasubi ‘the major spiritual centre’ and ‘the most active religious place’ in the Buganda kingdom (UNESCO 2015a). On the one hand the *Balokole* oppose this statement as they are against any traditional beliefs, and on the other hand they – as many other Christians – question it because they hold huge church services in Kampala which they would much rather define as the ‘most active religious places’.

In their problematic relationship with the kingdom, the *Balokole* are in the tradition of the other Christian denominations, as a glance at the relationship of the Christian denominations to the royal tombs in the past shows. Previously it was the missionaries who were agitating against the royal tombs. At the beginning of the 20th century, converts such as the Royal Prime Minister Apolo Kagga gave away objects from the royal tombs (like the twin object from Wamala mentioned above). While a British official at the beginning of the 20th century still pleaded to demolish the royal tombs (Cunningham 1969: 230), nowadays both the Church of Uganda (part of the Anglican Communion) and the Catholic Church (after the 2nd Vatican Council) have largely come to terms with the royal traditions. As a student of Ggaba National Seminary stated: ‘Always let good elements in the tradition which do not oppose Christianity be adopted and be transformed. In other words be christianized’ (Kiwauka 1980: without page numbers). In the 1970s, Kasubi was even called a model for customised sacral architecture (Lugira 1970: 40). In 1993 official representatives of the Catholic Church and the Church of Uganda attended the traditional part of the coronation of Kabaka Mutebi II. A Catholic priest was even among the traditional dignitaries performing the traditional part of the coronation (Mayer-Himmelheber 2004: 53).

In contrast to the Church of Uganda and the Catholic Church, most *Balokole* shun Kasubi and the other royal tombs even today. A *Mulokole* compares the relationship between the *Balokole* and local faith practices with a wrestling match between good and evil (Magumba 1998). However, Kabaka Mutebi, by realising the *Balokole*’s influential position in Uganda and the fact that they were not represented at the coronation, has attempted to assign a higher value to them. In doing so, he is torn between the custodians of tradition and the *Balokole* who demand an end to all ‘satanic royal rites’. For example, for the fifth coronation anniversary, the Kabaka sent only his cultural minister to a traditional ceremony rather than going himself and instead received hundreds of *Balokole* at the royal parliament for public prayers. The royal wedding service was led by Archbishop Mpalanyi Nkoyoyoa – a self-confessed *Mulokole* – whereas most traditional ceremonies were cancelled (Mayer-Himmelheber 2004: 138f, 192f).

Before the fire at Kasubi, the *Balokole* visited the Royal Tombs only to preach to the hereditary office holders, as a custodian explained: ‘*Balokole* came several times to preach to the women in the tombs to become born again’ (P.R., 09 September 1999). After the fire, however, Kasubi was described as a central place of religion in Buganda not only by the UNESCO, but also in the Ugandan news coverage; and religious leaders of all the large religious groups, including the *Balokole*, gathered for a service at Kasubi (Mukasa & Muwanika 2010).

But there are also critical voices amongst the *Balokole*, as this quote from a letter to the editor of the *New Vision*, a Ugandan daily paper, shows: ‘The prayers that were held at Kasubi tombs on Friday March 26 proved to us that our spiritual fathers are actually spiritual politicians.’

I was shocked to learn that even Apostle Alex Mitala, the chairman of the National Fellowship of Born-again Pentecostal churches was also in attendance. (...) The burning of the Kasubi tombs is carnal and, therefore, unacceptable. However, there is no way a true Christian can pray to God to rebuild a stronghold where satanic rituals such as devil invocation, pipe smoking, ancestral possession, fire altars, ritual cleansing, worship of the dead, are practised' (Kizito 2010).

The inner conflict can probably best be understood if one considers that some members of the Royal Parliament are also *Balokole*.

Conclusion

This article aimed at showing how, by the example of a single building, conflicts and debates at local, national and international/global level can be visualised.

The UNESCO has expanded its policy in the last decades from an originally purely preservational approach to the protection of intangible cultural heritage. It constantly encounters issues relating to authenticity and secrecy.

For the traditional monarchists, the fire at Kasubi on the one hand meant a great loss, but on the other hand it led to an up-valuation of their position. The modern monarchists who are entrusted with the organisation of the reconstruction face lots of problems due to lack of funds, according to a statement by the Royal Prime Minister Katikiro Peter Charles Mayiga, but also due to the numerous rituals used by the traditional monarchists to delay the reconstruction (Lule 2013). For the Baganda in the diaspora, Kasubi is an important part of their identity, providing a feeling of belonging. The fire has provided them with another opportunity to criticise the Ugandan government.

The Ugandan government under President Museveni is in a delicate situation, as it is not only being blamed by some of the monarchists for having caused the fire, but it is also the official negotiating partner of the UNESCO in the reconstruction of Kasubi. This might look like a very special conflict, but the general problem of power negotiating with traditional authorities has become quite virulent for many African heads of states since the 1990s (Goodfellow & Lindemann 2013: 3).

For the tourism industry, Kasubi is a place of financial interest and its destruction has been a huge loss of a 'unique selling point'. In this case, Kasubi is an example for the current boom of 'heritage' in Africa (see Strother 2012).

The members of the Asian community form one of the most significant donor groups among those acting in favour of the Buganda kingdom. They market themselves as friends of the Buganda kingdom. They wish to enhance their prestige through donations to the kingdom as a way of protecting themselves against future persecution, as one Muganda informant stated, 'They are trying to do as much as they can do to attract our attention. For example give money to rebuild⁴¹ Kasubi. They want to get favour, so that we don't have the same feelings as Amin' (F.B., 19 March 1999). For them, the reconstruction of Kasubi is another opportunity to invest through donations in their security in Uganda. But they have to perform a balancing act between supporting the monarchy on the one hand and the Ugandan government on the other hand in order not to alienate any of these two influential players.

The Born Again Christians (*Balokole*) are torn between two sides: rejecting 'satanic' rituals – as Christians; and supporting their king as Baganda.

⁴¹ In 1999 'rebuilding' meant 'restoring'.

Depending on the perspective of the different actors, Kasubi is therefore a place of royal legitimacy and political power, a place of cultural heritage or ‘satanic rites’, a family cemetery, tourist attraction, world heritage site and place of residence—a place to generate social as well as financial capital.

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