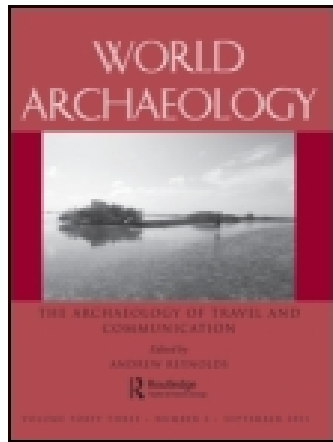


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# Local communities, politics and the management of the Kasubi tombs, Uganda

Remigius Kigongo and Andrew Reid

## Abstract

The Kasubi tombs are the resting place of the previous four kings of Buganda. All four kings are buried within the *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga*, a unique structure which offers an unparalleled insight into the precolonial building traditions of Uganda. Being constructed almost entirely from various materials of botanical origin, there are considerable issues of preservation and conservation that have to be tackled at the site. Yet management of the site is by no means a straightforward process because of a number of issues. The original burial of Mutesa I in 1884 represented a shift in funerary practice related to the politics of the time and the interment of the subsequent three kings was a major change in practice, unseen in precolonial times. There is also currently significant factional fighting within Buganda over control of the tombs and the important rituals that continue to take place there. Meanwhile, national government wishes to use Kasubi as the showpiece of Uganda's heritage, as demonstrated by its recently acquired World Heritage status, but has no authority to oversee any form of management activity at the site. Kasubi is therefore not a mere symbol of precolonial achievement, but also of colonial transformation and ultimately of post-colonial accommodation.

## Keywords

Kasubi tombs; Buganda kingdom; kingship; heritage site management.

The influence of politics on the management of historical sites is hardly a new concern and has raised increasing levels of discussion in recent decades (e.g. Layton 1989; McManamon and Hatton 2000). All too often the dominant issue has been the misinterpretation, or worse misappropriation, of local sites by non-indigenous populations, frequently in a colonial setting (Lowenthal 1990). Not surprisingly, work has focused on demanding local participation in the management of sites (Derry 2003). Clearly, this is a vital theme for all heritage site management issues. To emphasize this point, a number of publications have sought to make the case for planning to represent

fully the interests of local communities (e.g. Ndoro 2001) and increasingly these interests are represented in the policies and activities of organizations such as UNESCO.

However, there are frequently simplistic assumptions made that local management will necessarily resolve satisfactorily all issues relating to the site and that simply handing over management of sites is the automatic solution to all heritage problems. Such a move is ultimately patronizing towards the local communities and fails to engage with the specific sites and the issues that need to be overcome in each particular case. An excellent example of these problems is the case of the Kasubi tombs, Uganda's only cultural site on the World Heritage List, inscribed in 2001. Kasubi has recently been hailed as an example of successful management practice where central government has returned control of a heritage resource to the indigenous populations who are directly associated with it (Munjeri 2004; Ndoro 2004). The assumption seems to be that there is a traditional and unproblematic, locally defined organization and management system to be returned to. As will be seen in this paper, at Kasubi nothing is quite what it seems.

### **The kingdom of Buganda**

The Kasubi tombs hold the remains of the previous four rulers or *kabakas* of the kingdom of Buganda. Buganda itself can in no way be considered to be a disadvantaged and marginalized community which has no access to politics within Uganda. By the nineteenth century, Buganda was the most powerful of the Great Lakes kingdoms, dominating southern Uganda with its armies and the northern part of the Victoria Nyanza with its navies (Reid 2002). Although Buganda underwent a period of crippling civil war in the 1880s and 1890s, it still emerged as the principal player in the creation of the Uganda Protectorate under British authority. Because it was a protectorate rather than a colony, there was no significant settlement of Europeans in the territory. Instead, in a model case of indirect rule, Buganda's political organization was considered ideal for the other societies within the territory, and so Ganda chiefs were sent out to govern other communities, a role which did not endear Buganda to the rest of the country. With Buganda also being the seat of colonial power, the *kabaka*, or king, was fully incorporated into the activities of the colonial state, and new traditions of kingship and social status were created in the colonial idiom (see Ranger 1983). From the 1880s, Buganda was also the principal focus of missionary activities. The factions in the civil war at the end of the nineteenth century were religious, being divided into Protestants, Catholics and Muslims. Buganda converts subsequently spread their new-found religion to other parts of Uganda. The fetishes, shrines and spirits of traditional religion, which had been openly present in houses and compounds, were rapidly hidden, but not entirely forgotten, in the desire to demonstrate new religious zeal (Welbourn 1962).

In the 1950s, *Kabaka* Mutesa II was briefly exiled, an act which helped establish his credentials as a potential political figure at Independence in 1962. He had his own political party (*Kabaka Yekka* – 'the *Kabaka* alone') and he was installed as the country's first president as a counter to the constitutionally more powerful position of prime minister, held by Milton Obote. In 1966 Mutesa's palace was attacked by the army and he escaped into exile. The following year Obote abolished the kingdoms (Buganda, together with Bunyoro, Ankole and Toro), assuming all Buganda's property, including the tombs. This consolidated

the power of Obote and then Amin, and of the army, establishing the rule of factions from northern Uganda and countering the privileged status of the southern kingdoms during colonial times. The status of Buganda was restored in 1993 by the Museveni regime keen to placate Ganda interests in the by-then stabilized country. Baganda (the people of Buganda) now number approximately 17 per cent of the total population of Uganda (around 27 million), the largest ethnic group in the country. Since the reinstatement of the kingdom there have been growing calls for some kind of federal system which allows Buganda to control its own affairs and more importantly to reclaim its land. As this disputed land includes Kampala and all the country's major facilities and institutions, this is clearly problematic. Buganda is not, therefore, and has never been an isolated, marginalized, underprivileged society. Instead, besides impoverished rural farmers, its people include extremely sophisticated urban elites, which actively participate in all aspects of the state.

### The royal tombs at Kasubi

The Kasubi tombs are situated in the suburbs of Kampala, some 4 kilometres from the city centre. The site occupies one of Kampala's many hilltops and consists of a number of examples of traditional architecture (Fig. 1). These include the *Bujjabukula* (gateway house), *Ndoga-Obukaba* (drum house), *Olugya* (courtyard), the various 'widows' council houses and, of course, the main tomb building itself, the *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga*. *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga* means 'it is an unusual person who begets a cock [i.e. *Kabaka*]', which Ray (1991: 140) interprets to mean that only a king can bear an heir to the throne. Beyond these central structures, there are also other buildings behind the inner fence, including important houses used for keeping the royal relics, the graveyard, two mounds and banana plantations. The whole site occupies a total area of almost 35 hectares.

The *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga* contains the tombs of the previous four *kabakas* of Buganda (Plate 1). The structure was originally used to inter the body of Mutesa I who died in 1884. The building was constructed on the site of the royal enclosure of the late king's last capital, which had been built in 1882. It was built in the same style and manner as the major structures which would have been found throughout the capital. There may have been up to 100 such buildings within the royal enclosure itself and more, possibly up to 400, in the major compounds throughout the rest of the capital (Gutkind 1963). As the only such structure of this size still in existence the *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga* is therefore extremely important, not just for its housing of the bodies of the kings and their ritual importance to Buganda, but also for the preservation of the techniques used to form domestic structures within the royal enclosure.

It is a hugely impressive structure, over 30 metres in diameter and 8 metres in height. A detailed account of the construction of this kind of building is provided by Roscoe (1911: 369–74; see also Kagwa 1934 [1918]: 76). The structure is formed from a series of concentric reed rings suspended over a wooden pillar frame (Fig. 2). The initial stage was to erect the pillars that support the roof. Scaffolding was then built to the height of the topmost pillars from which the builders worked. Construction commenced with the top of the roof and the central ring, called *Nkata*. This, with the next two rings, *Katumyo* and *Bugwe*, was often dyed red and black and Roscoe (1911: 371) suggests that all three also

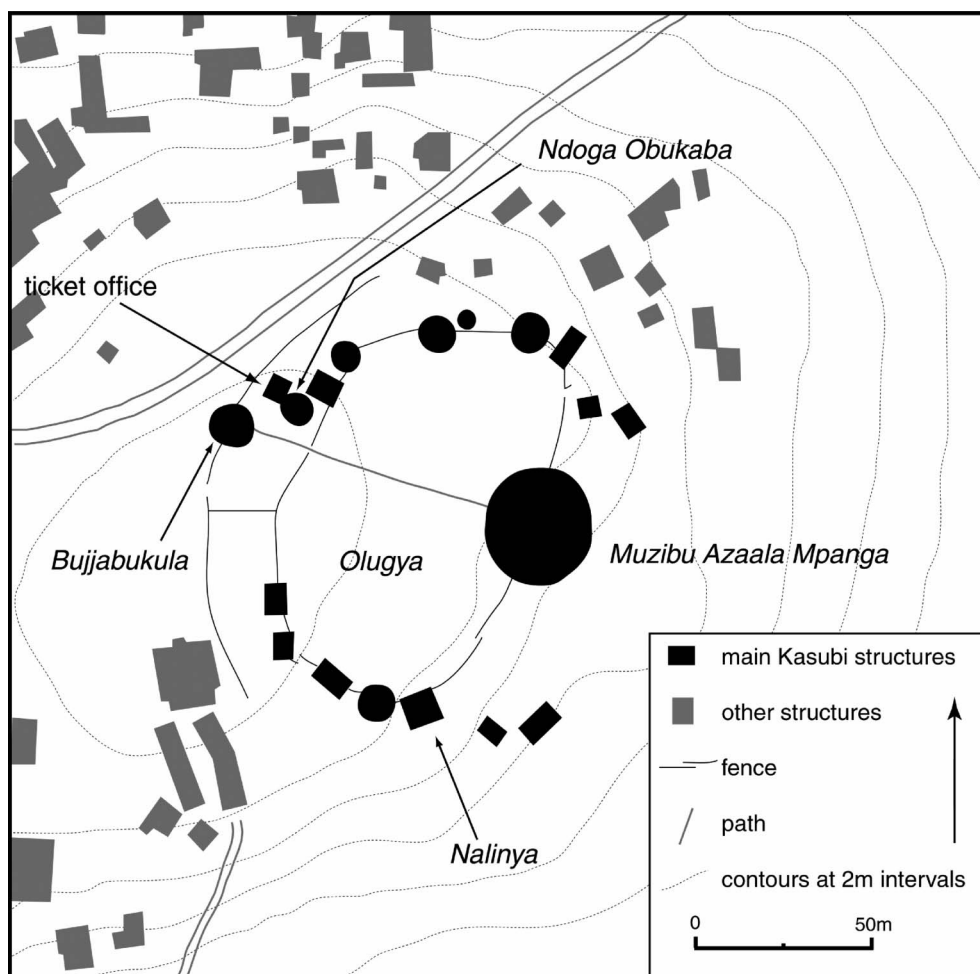


Figure 1 Plan of the Kasubi tombs.

each had their own cost: a slave girl, a woman and a cow respectively. To these rings the reed frame of the roof was carefully stitched so as to hide the joins. As work progressed the three central rings were raised and more rings were added as needed, eventually forming a smooth reed-work roof that reached all the way to the floor. Over the top of this was placed a grass thatch. This thatch was not attached to the building but rather, beginning from the floor, was arranged in overlapping bundles to form a covering ultimately up to a metre in thickness. The whole structure is therefore a considerable feat of building skill and represents a huge collection of different plant-based building resources. The provision and preparation of reeds, palm fronds, grasses and timbers was a considerable undertaking. In the troubled times of the second half of the nineteenth century, the capital was moved and entirely rebuilt on ten occasions, involving huge operations to collect resources and organize building (Gutkind 1963). It is not surprising then that considerable prestige was associated with the builders of these structures. Indeed, the royal



Plate 1 The *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga* (photo by Remigiug Kigongo).

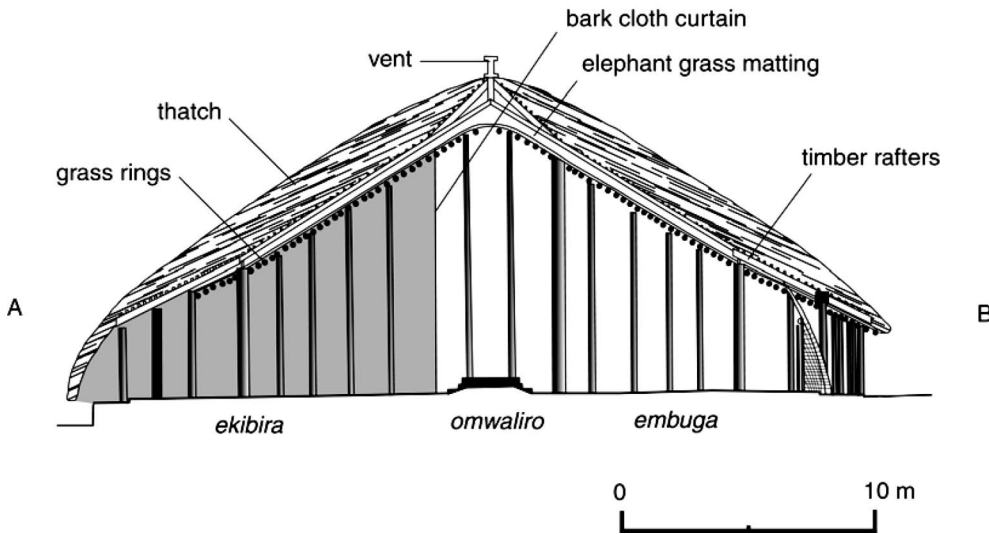


Figure 2 Section through the *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga* showing construction.

houses were built by designated members of particular clans. Each clan, of which it is generally stated there are fifty-two in Buganda, contributed its own reed ring to the construction of the *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga*. The *Ngo* (leopard) clan was responsible for craftsmanship of the pillars. The *Ngeye* (colobus monkey) clan undertook the thatching of the structure. In both cases the specific artisans involved had to observe a period of sexual abstinence, but they were also absolved from taxation, arrest and execution (Roscoe 1911: 370).

Within the *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga* there are four raised plinths, on a platform known as the *omwaliro*, representing the tombs of the four kings which dominate the *embuga*, the open area between the tombs and the main entrance (Fig. 3). The *embuga* is the court and

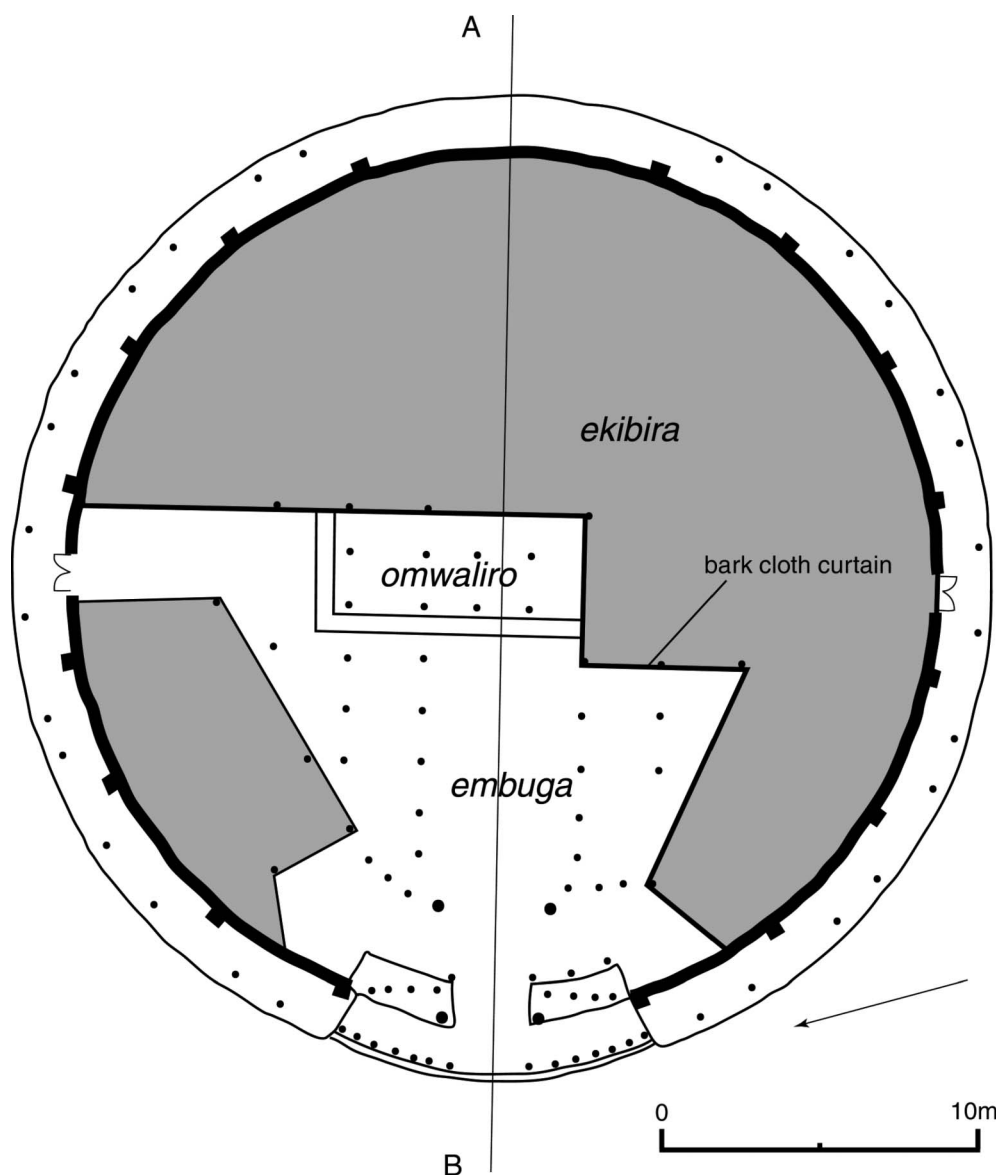


Figure 3 Plan of the *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga*.

this replicates the palace of the living king (Plate 2). People coming to the *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga* attend the court of the four dead kings and are expected to show due deference. In front of the four tombs a selection of regalia are displayed consisting of pictures, spears and other metal items associated with each individual king (Plate 3). These regalia serve to separate people in the *embuga* from the sanctity of the *omwaliro* (Ray 1991: 141). The role of regalia has been discussed in relation to a number of the Great Lakes kingdoms (e.g. Sassoon 1982; Van Noten 1983) as embodying the power and ritual significance of the



Plate 2 The *embuga* (photograph courtesy of Thierry Joffroy, CRA Terre-ENSAG).



Plate 3 The royal regalia at the front of the *omwaliro* (photo by Remigius Kigongo).

king. Interesting items present in the Buganda regalia are several examples known as *mpiima*. These are extremely slender and are made of soft metal such as copper or brass. The *mpiima* consists of a central shaft, around 50 centimetres in length, with two curved prongs splaying in opposite directions from this shaft. The guides at Kasubi are unsure about the function or meaning of this item and, for instance, give one unlikely explanation which suggests that it was used by the king to behead two people at the same time. In fact, the *mpiima* is an item encountered in the kingdoms to the south west, including Nkore, Karagwe and Rwanda (Sassoon 1982). In the case of Karagwe the *mpiima* in the royal regalia is a solid iron hammer anvil with prongs welded to the shaft shaped like the horns

of the typical long-horned Ankole breed of cattle that is favoured in this area (Reid and MacLean 1995). In the contexts of the kingdoms of south-western Uganda, north-western Tanzania and Rwanda, this marriage of iron working and cattle was a key element of the king's power. In the forests of Buganda, which featured neither cattle rearing nor a well-established iron industry, the *mpiima* was not such an obvious image of power. Rather the presence of *mpiima* in the regalia at Kasubi demonstrates the inherent ability and possibly even need for Great Lakes kingdoms to borrow symbols of power and authority from their neighbours, even where the original meaning was irrelevant.

The description provided thus far represents the public areas of the *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga*. Huge barkcloth shrouds block off the remainder of the structure. The back part of the building, in common with other royal shrines, is known as the *ekibira*, or forest (Ray 1991: 139). Spirits are generally thought to dwell or be at home in forests, and the *ekibira* at Kasubi is believed to be where the spirits of the dead kings reside. Royal spirits, particularly those of the most recently deceased king, were considered to be extremely powerful and required careful placation by the reigning king. It is no surprise therefore that only specifically defined officials have access to this space.

Royal shrines were extremely important in Buganda society (Ray 1972). Through an elaborate ritual process (see Roscoe 1911: 103–13) the *kabaka's* body was buried separately from his jawbone and control of the latter was deemed to be essential for factions who aspired to place their own candidate on the throne since he would be perceived as being able to stop the dead king's spirit from speaking. The locations of the tombs of earlier *kabakas* are well known, mostly in the county of Busiro to the north west of present day Kampala (Oliver 1959). Each one of these is now a small shrine still attended today. These royal ancestor spirits were powerful influences on the running of the state and were fully woven into the state's organization. The Chief of Busiro county, called *Mugema*, was known as the 'Father of the King' and also the '*Katikiro* [chief minister] of the dead' (Roscoe 1911). The *Mugema* was not only responsible for overseeing the welfare of the tombs, but also played an integral part in the succession after a *kabaka's* death.

The spirits of the dead kings were therefore clearly important and were considered to be active in the living world. A range of different ritual ceremonies were undertaken at these shrines as the shrine interceded between the living and the dead. While ceremonies could take place at any time it was usual for people to 'attend the court' (*kukiika mbuga*) of the royal ancestors on the day after the appearance of the new moon (Ray 1991: 143–6). New moon rituals were common in many of the Great Lakes kingdoms and represented the renewal of life. On such occasions the dead king's twin, a heavily decorated fetish that contained his umbilical cord and which accompanied the king throughout his life, was brought out of seclusion. The shrine was attended by a medium, often a woman, who would usually position herself on the *omwaliro* platform, occupying the transitional space between the private *ekibira* and the public *embuga*.

The spirits of the deceased kings were all considered still to be kings in their own right. As Roscoe (1911; see also Ray 1991: 133–8) pointed out at length in his discussion of the layout of the capital, only one king could occupy a particular hilltop. Hence, within the capital the *kabaka* lived in the royal enclosure on one hill and the capital extended over the surrounding land to the north, or rather away from the lake. The compound of the

mother of the king was situated across a stream (i.e. on another hill) near to the shrine of the previous *kabaka*. The Mugema himself, being 'Father of the King', and therefore in some regards a king in his own right, also lived on another hill and did not share food with the *kabaka*. Each of the royal tombs in Busiro also occupies its own hill. Therefore, the presence of four *kabakas* under the same roof at Kasubi does not follow pre-colonial or 'traditional' practice. Probably influenced by both Islam and Christianity, but also as a result of his running confrontation with the priests of the many different Ganda gods and spirits, Mutesa ordered that his body should be buried in his old palace, and not in Busiro, without having the skull and jawbone removed (Kagwa 1934 [1918]: 14; Ray 1991: 111–13). On his death the burial and succession was undertaken in great haste to install his successor Mwanga, avoiding many of the rituals which took place over a five-month period. Kasubi is not simply a representation of 'traditional' practice, nor is it merely a colonial accommodation or incorporation of past activities: its construction and use are specific events that took place in the historical context of the late nineteenth century. Subsequently, of course, the tomb did become part of the colonial kingdom and took on the role of a mausoleum, establishing the historical integrity of the Buganda kingdom as well as continuing to have a more private ritual significance for the mainstream kingship. Mwanga's body was returned in 1910, after he had died in exile in the Seychelles in 1903, and was buried alongside Mutesa. It is quite likely that this burial in his father's tomb was an attempt to control any potential disaffection that the presence of the exiled king's spirit might create. It is also possible that this act recognized the decline in the political significance of the king's body. In burying Mwanga with his father a precedent was set for burying all subsequent kings at the same location. There is clearly great scope – well beyond the capabilities of the present paper – to explore the archives of Buganda and of the British administration, not to mention the various Christian denominations, as the role of Kasubi was negotiated through the twentieth century. Of course, a further consequence of this change in practice to a single mausoleum was to reduce the role of the clans in the key ritual processes of the state – the preparation and performance of burial rituals and the creation of the new king. It has been suggested that conflict between the kingdom and the clans was the key undertone of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Buganda, both removing the clans' political status and rebutting their claims to land (Hanson 2003).

A further discrepancy with pre-colonial times was that structures such as the mausoleum were erected with the full intention that they should be left to collapse, as the influence of the departed *kabaka's* spirit on society perhaps waned. A final state act was to build a much smaller structure over the grave, such as those in Busiro, which was then more regularly maintained. In 1938, the *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga*, being in a serious state of disrepair, was renovated by engineers who apparently not only reduced the size of the roof of the tomb but also set its base in concrete. There are therefore no indigenous traditions of conservation associated with such structures, which could be incorporated into management plans. All that exists is the skills of construction and outright replacement which are retained by a few individuals. While the *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga* is an extremely important building, it is not a simple relic of pre-colonial practice and, if it can be considered 'traditional', it is much more an embodiment of colonial traditions.

### **The unity of Buganda**

Calls to return site management to local communities, particularly those relating to African contexts, tend to present a picture of unity of purpose as if there were a self-regulating consensus whereby all members of society could habitually identify and undertake the appropriate course of action. This is the same kind of simplistic assumption made within colonial practices of indirect rule. It is, however, clear that indirect rule created new and enhanced forms of power in which the positions of kings and chiefs were greatly exaggerated and considerably less effort on their part was required in order to get decisions accepted (Mamdani 1996).

Historical studies make it clear that significant changes in political organization took place. The best example is perhaps Twaddle's (1993) study of the career of Kakungulu during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which emphasizes the constant and ultimately unsuccessful political battles Kakungulu fought to try to advance his career. At Kasubi, a visit to the tombs in 2005 helped demonstrate almost immediately that there is no such unity in the present day. Upon entering the tombs through the impressive *Bujjabukula*, the visitor is met by one of the guides. These are men (usually) who will conduct the tour around the compound. However their first act is to ask the visitor to go and purchase a ticket from an adjacent office which they do not enter, nor do they seem to converse with the ticket sellers inside. The ticket sellers provide no information about the tombs and take no further participation in the visit. The reason for this strange disjuncture is very simple. The guides work for *Bulange*, the impressive Buganda parliament building where the *Kabaka* and his officers are based. The ticket sellers, on the other hand, work for the *Nalinya*, the descendant of the sister of the dead king, who assumes responsibility for his tomb and controls the compound. The present *Nalinya* for Kasubi is well known to be a member of a counter faction within Buganda that disputes the legitimacy of the current occupant's claim to the throne. The two factions have prosecuted a bitter feud, with Kasubi often a significant battlefield. Thus, the national newspapers have featured stories, which have proved to have limited legitimacy, about, for example, intentions to site a petrol station at Kasubi or misappropriation of donor funds for repair of the site.

### **The preservation of Kasubi**

It has also been suggested that preservation and conservation problems at Kasubi relate to the ineffectual actions of government and in particular the Department of Museums and Monuments (formerly the Department of Antiquities and Museums and before that the Department of Antiquities). Here it is important to separate the vital role played during the early years of independence from that in the more economically stable recent years in which Kasubi has been the focal point for income-generating activities. Together with the different Buganda factions, the government and the Department of Museums and Monuments all have competing interests in Kasubi and possess distinct levels of authority, influence and leverage.

On the abolition of the kingdoms in 1967, government assumed control of Kasubi. That Kasubi survived the violence of Idi Amin, and more especially Milton Obote's second regime in the early 1980s, is quite remarkable. In the context of nightly rampage, murder and destruction in the later years, why was there no targeting of the tombs (official or unofficial) where a loose flame would have proved catastrophic? Perhaps the answer lies in the power of the tombs themselves. Certainly Amin understood their power. It is often overlooked that Amin was very popular in his initial years, not least because one of his first acts was to bring Mutesa II's body back from exile to be buried at Kasubi. Any direct targeting of Kasubi would have caused unnecessary disaffection among the Baganda, who formed the majority of the inhabitants of Kampala. It is not so obvious why Kasubi avoided unregulated action by soldiers, who were increasingly out of control, but perhaps this was due to their fear of the buried kings' spirits and the retribution that might follow. Whatever the reason, Kasubi obviously retains its power in the postcolonial era.

The then Department of Antiquities was placed in a very difficult position during the troubled times. By law they were required to protect national monuments, but in some cases they were actively banned from visiting sites (such as Bigo bya Mugenyi) because they were perceived to draw too much attention to southern historical achievements as opposed to the northern origins of the soldiers and politicians. Officials of the department, who would mostly have been from the south, if not from Buganda itself, would have known how dangerous it would have been to pass through the inevitable roadblocks and be seen to be going to Kasubi. By the late 1980s, with the return of security under the Museveni regime, the department was able to undertake more active work at Kasubi. However, the economic constraints of the time, as the government attempted to rebuild the economy by restricting expenditure, and the almost complete lack of interest on the part of government with regard to cultural heritage seriously hampered activity. Despite this, basic upkeep of the tombs was sustained. Marked deterioration was noticeable at the tombs *only after* they had been returned to Buganda, as power struggles ensued, but also because of the lack of awareness of what was needed. To a certain extent it can also be argued that this deterioration was the result of pronounced neglect which set in from 1967.

These unique circumstances make current attempts at conservation extremely difficult. There are no extant traditions of conservation of structures that can be tapped into, only traditions of building, which are slowly disappearing. This means that new practices and standards of conservation and management have to be created. The Department of Museums and Monuments is well aware of this, not least because it has government demanding to know what is happening at the tombs. Equally the department knows that it has no authority over the tombs and cannot impose any kind of plan. Any such attempt to do so would be rejected as the unwanted interference of national government. The department is forced to try to negotiate a plan of action between the two factions whose primary instinct is to oppose the other's ideas as a matter of principle. Fundamental issues that continually arise include determining what restoration work is necessary and who can undertake such work. This is further complicated by the many restricted locations within the shrine and determining which people have the authority to work in such places, who

should supervise their work to ensure that nothing untoward is done and how to monitor such places in the first place in order to be able to assess such conservation issues. Then there are more obvious problems such as who should pay for conservation and who determines the organization and development of the preservation of the site.

Determining and sustaining these protocols for conservation is a major issue in the management of the site. Given the wide range of plant materials present, decay is a serious problem. In the warm and wet equatorial environment damp and rot is a major issue, as is infestation by insects, particularly termites. The problem is not simply one of decay. In such ideal growing conditions freshly cut poles can often re-establish roots and begin to grow. In 1997 *ficus* branches were growing out of the thatch of the *Muzibu-Azaala-Mpanga*. It is in the context of negotiating the management of the tombs that World Heritage status has actually played a role, perhaps unwittingly. Uganda's cultural heritage does not fit the mould of monumentality which the World Heritage list was originally intended to highlight. There are no traditions of stone or brick building from the past nor are there significant rock art traditions. Kasubi was as a result an obvious site to choose for Uganda's first cultural World Heritage Site. Its citation was based on being a masterpiece of human creativity, in both its conception and its execution; a key representation of the living culture of Buganda; a unique example of the architectural traditions of Buganda; and a key historical and religious centre within the kingdom. This unrivalled recognition of Kasubi, and tangentially of Buganda, enabled the Department of Museums and Monuments to establish protocols for managing the site and to arrange for its effective monitoring. This was adopted despite the potential problems caused by seemingly privileging Buganda's heritage over other interests within the nation. Furthermore, World Heritage status has facilitated an externally funded research project on the thatched roofs which has promoted monitoring and restoration.

Yet there are still fundamental problems at Kasubi, in large part because it still holds considerable significance for people today. There are ceremonies regularly held at the site, which include, for example, the new moon festival, funeral rights, cleansing of royal objects, introduction of new members of the royal family, special political announcements and consultations. The importance of this continued ritual significance cannot be overestimated. On the one hand, it demonstrates that the tombs continue to have relevance as living locations in today's society. On the other, the need to protect these ritual activities, or perhaps to hide their true extent in the face of contemporary Christian and Muslim practice, means that significant parts of the tombs have to be closed off to the public. This detracts from the visitor experience, limiting the extent to which they can engage with and understand the site. It is entirely appropriate that the interests of the local population should take priority, but it also needs to be recognized that this has negative consequences for the development of the location as a tourist attraction.

Clearly Kasubi is an extremely complex phenomenon and any attempts to present the site as a model of local community action are deeply flawed. Kasubi is not simply an example of traditional architecture, but is rather a historical monument which relates to important events in the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial history of Uganda. The challenge facing management of Kasubi is to create a heritage location which respects its

significance for Buganda, while also creating a viable attraction that is appropriate to the interests of both Buganda and Uganda: by no means an easy task.

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