

# Epidemics and Ethnic Identity: The Case of Busoga, Uganda, 1880s-1912

**William Musamba<sup>1</sup>**  
Makerere University

**Zaid Sekito**  
Makerere University

## Abstract

This study builds on the concept of moral ethnicity to analyse the influence of the sleeping sickness epidemic on the evolution of Basoga ethnic identity between 1880 and 1912. Using the Confidential Minute Papers of the Uganda National Archives, the study argues that ethnic identity of the Basoga was rooted in shared experiences, histories, and social contexts, rather than just biological or cultural essentialism. This article highlights the shared hardships that fostered social integration based on indigenous relationships among the diverse sociopolitical groups of the Basoga. The study underscores the agency of repeated epidemics in dissolving the social divisions and fostering a shared Basoga ethnic identity which was later formalized by the colonial administration in the 1900s. The article accentuates how the destructive impact of the epidemics and the arbitrary remedies of the colonial state reinforced the emergent social integration thus, fusing the varied sub-groups together despite decades of hostilities and incessant warfare. The unprecedented migrations distorted the existent boundaries, creating conditions of emerging social cohesion, out of which sprung the ethno-identity pool of the Basoga people of eastern Uganda. The unparalleled boundary openness, socio-cultural fusion, and peculiar flexibility, as well as continual accommodation and assiduous integration formed a colossal expression of moral ethnicity.

*Keywords: Busoga, ethnic identity, epidemics, moral ethnicity*

## Introduction

The twenty-first century has attracted a wide scholarship on the histories of epidemics and their adverse consequences on the socioeconomic conditions of societies, political arrangements, and international policies. Epidemics such as the Black Death, Spanish flu, smallpox, sleeping sickness, cholera, Ebola, and HIV/AIDS have been extensively studied due to their detrimental outcomes on the fortunes of humanity and society in general. Ultimately, unprecedented death, population

<sup>1</sup> The author can be reached for correspondence at: [musamba.william@mak.ac.ug](mailto:musamba.william@mak.ac.ug)

decline, general loss of confidence in indigenous mechanisms of control, as well as the resultant famines have been widely studied as consequences of numerous epidemics.<sup>2</sup> However, the nexus between epidemics and ethnic identity remains murky because scholars have generally focused on the histories and management of epidemics without focusing directly on the resultant dislocations and integrations of peoples into formidable ethnicities. This article, therefore, analyses the influence of the sleeping sickness epidemic on the evolution of Busoga ethnic identity between 1880 and 1912.

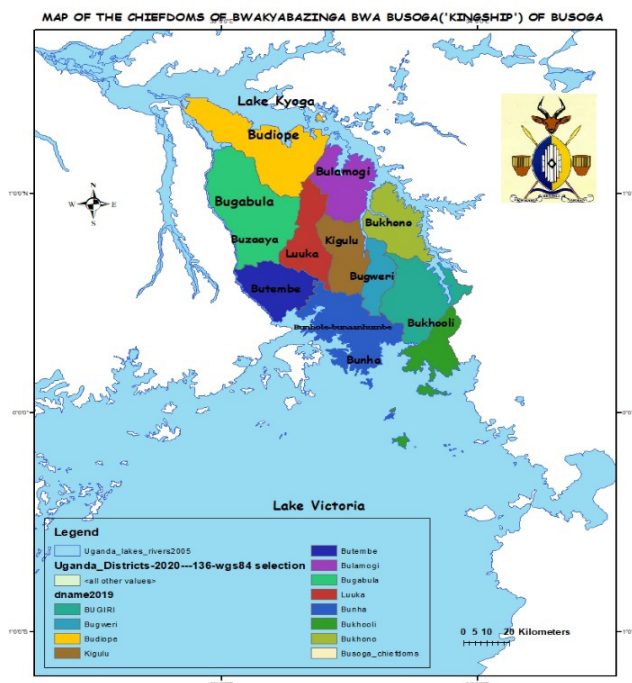


Figure 1: Map of Busoga, drawn by Benard Lutalo, © Benard Lutalo

The East African region experienced a series of recurring and diverse disease outbreaks between the 1880s and 1940s. The period in focus began with the process of European imperial entry into Africa and ended with the beginning of waves of colonial retreat. The process of imperial entry occurred simultaneously with the outbreak of numerous epidemics which affected the African populations and created lasting socioeconomic and political consequences that still remain evident today. According to Richard Waller, these epidemics, stirring concurrently with incessant droughts, were probably the most serious disaster which the East African region experienced in the last two-hundred years.<sup>3</sup> Areas around Lake Victoria were hard hit: cattle economies devastated, populations decimated as the epidemics spread rapidly

- 2 Daniel R. Headrick, 'Sleeping Sickness Epidemics and Colonial Responses in East and Central Africa, 1900-1940,' *PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases* 8, no. 4 (April 24, 2014); Dirk Kohnert, 'On the Socio-Economic Impact of Pandemics in Africa: Lessons Learned from COVID-19, Trypanosomiasis, HIV, Yellow Fever and Cholera' (Institute of African Studies, GIGA-Hamburg, May 4, 2021); Juhani Koponen, 'War, Famine and Pestilence in Late Pre-Colonial Tanzania: A Case of Heightened Mortality,' *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21, no. 4 (1988): 637-76.
- 3 Richard Waller, 'Ecology, Migration and Expansion in East Africa,' *African Affairs* 84, no. 336 (July 1985): 354.

at the close of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Leprosy was prevalent in the areas of Kigezi, particularly around Lake Bunyonyi, Kumi and Ongino in Teso, Buluba in Busoga, and Nyenga on Buganda's eastern frontiers.<sup>5</sup>

Other epidemics included smallpox, cholera, bubonic plague, and syphilis, which traumatized the population and left it very weak and exhausted.<sup>6</sup> For instance, according to Megan Vaughan, 80% of the Baganda population was infected with syphilis, which led to the rise of infant mortality in Buganda from 50% to 60% in 1908.<sup>7</sup> Besides, rinderpest and jiggers infestations affected the livestock population and crippled many East African communities economically during the early years of European colonial rule.<sup>8</sup> However, most devastating of all the epidemics was sleeping sickness, which ravaged the areas of southern Busoga, Buvuma Islands, Lake Tanganyika shores, and much of northern German East Africa during the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries. In the words of Shane Doyle, 'Around 1900, many people living on the northern shores of the great Nyanza (Lake Victoria) began to die after wasting away into thinness and falling into a nodding impenetrable sleep, driving their flight from villages and migration to areas not yet touched by illness.'<sup>9</sup>

Although these epidemics were not new to Africa, the magnitude with which they affected the indigenous societies defied that of any previous outbreak. Many parts of Africa had ever experienced sleeping sickness epidemic long before the nineteenth century. For instance, according to Kohnert, 'In the fourteenth century, the Arab historian Ibn Khaldun wrote that King Diata II of Mali had died of it. It was known to the Europeans along the West African coast in the eighteenth century and the lower Congo in the nineteenth century.'<sup>10</sup> It was indeed partly due to the sleeping sickness menace that the notion of the 'white man's grave' was labelled upon Africa as many Europeans could hardly survive its scourge. Tom Gale notes that 'Whenever non-immune Europeans were introduced into an infested area; an outbreak could kill many of them quickly. Epidemics were frequent and in some years, the death rate was truly appalling.'<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, 'One hundred Europeans may have died in Sierra Leone in 1823, 1859 and 1866. In the Gambia in 1825, 199 soldiers arrived in May and 160 were dead by the end of the year.'<sup>12</sup> According to Philip Curtin, the European predicament was a result of 'lack of immunity... an immunity that many Africans acquired in childhood.'<sup>13</sup>

The social structure of the pre-colonial kin-based African societies provided

4 Ibid., 354.

5 Kathleen Vongsathorn, '"Things That Matter": Missionaries, Government and Patients in the Shaping of Uganda's Leprosy Settlements, 1927-1951,' (PhD Thesis, UK, Oxford, 2012), 6.

6 Shane Doyle, *Crisis and Decline in Bunyoro: Population and Environment in Western Uganda 1860-1955* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006), 142-144.

7 Megan Vaughan, 'Syphilis in Colonial East and Central Africa: The Social Construction of an Epidemic,' in *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence*, ed. Terence Ranger and Paul Slack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 269.

8 Heather J. Hoag, 'Book Review: *Crisis and Decline in Bunyoro: Population and Environment in Western Uganda, 1860-1955* by Shane Doyle,' *the International Journal of African Historical Studies* 40, no. 1 (2007): 177.

9 Doyle, *Crisis and Decline in Bunyoro*, 1.

10 Kohnert, 'On the Socio-Economic Impact of Pandemics in Africa,' 1.

11 Tom Gale, 'Hygeia and Empire: The Impact of Disease on the Coming of Colonial Rule in British West Africa,' *Transafrican Journal of History*, 11 (1982): 83.

12 Ibid., 83.

13 Philip Curtin, 'The End of the 'White Man's Grave'? Nineteenth-Century Mortality in West Africa,' *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 21, no. 1 (1990): 63.

remedies against the dangerous consequences of epidemics. As Waller writes: 'Many East African societies were composite, developing from the partial fusion of separate groups detached from different parent societies and linked together through the gradual assumption of a common identity based on their mutual exploitation of a particular ecological niche.'<sup>14</sup> Diverse ecological variations ranged from 'semi-desert through dry savannah plains to well-watered uplands with extensive areas of montane forests and a lake-shore environment as well.'<sup>15</sup> Bunyoro, for instance, was able to use the wealth of its environmental resources to support its population.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, African communities used the ecological variations to their social advantage. They, for instance, according to Headrick, 'established a rough equilibrium between two ecosystems, the human and domestic on the one hand, and the natural and wild on the other,' which enabled them to eschew the causative habitats of sleeping sickness.<sup>17</sup> Hoag further notes that, the Africans' ability to master and control the environmental resources guaranteed economic expansion as well as organised activities such as 'grass burning, hunting, and rain-making,' which helped to mitigate the adverse impact of epidemics on humanity.<sup>18</sup>

However, growing European interest in Africa distorted the long-established equilibrium which caused numerous cycles of ecological catastrophes giving rise to epidemics and famines of devastating magnitudes.<sup>19</sup> According to Hoag, for instance, 'Motivated by their desire to secure Buganda and the Nile River, the personal ambitions of ground-level imperialists and hatred for Kabalega, between 1893 and 1899 British forces waged one of the longest colonial conquests in East Africa which resulted in a deteriorating environment, giving rise to epidemics, malnutrition and poverty.'<sup>20</sup>

As such, European influence caused social dislocations, leading to the loss of indigenous mechanisms of control, thus exacerbating epidemics.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, the East African region was struck with diverse epidemic outbreaks of alarming consequences, notably, syphilis, gonorrhoea, smallpox and sleeping sickness of which the latter was proved to be the most devastating. For instance, in a 1940 Memo to the Eastern Provincial Commissioner, Governor Sir Phillip Mitchel noted: 'before the sleeping sickness pandemic, there was half a million people or more in Busoga'<sup>22</sup> most of whom were concentrated in southern Busoga, which was 'the seat of Busoga's banana economy.'<sup>23</sup> The strategic location and proximity to Lake Victoria led to the abundance of convectional rainfall which boosted southern Busoga's agricultural economy, sustaining the needs of the growing population. Luba's country in particular, benefited immensely from the strategic location as heavy tolls of revenues were raised from canoes crossing to Buganda. The thriving economy, trade, and other attributes of strategic importance prompted the colonial officials to choose Luba's

14 Waller, 'Ecology, Migration and Expansion in East Africa,' 350.

15 Ibid., 348.

16 Hoag, 'Continuities in Governance in Late Colonial and Early Post-Colonial East Africa,' 177.

17 Headrick, 'Sleeping Sickness Epidemics and Colonial Responses in East and Central Africa, 1900-1940,' 1.

18 Hoag, 'Continuities in Governance in Late Colonial and Early Post-Colonial East Africa,' 177.

19 Headrick, 'Sleeping Sickness Epidemics and Colonial Responses in East and Central Africa, 1900-1940,' 1.

20 Hoag, 'Continuities in Governance in Late Colonial and Early Post-Colonial East Africa,' 177.

21 Koponen, 'War, Famine and Pestilence in Late Pre-Colonial Tanzania,' 637.

22 His Excellency Sir Philip Mitchel, Governor of Uganda Protectorate, Memo to the Provincial Commissioner, Eastern Province, April 3, 1940, Box 22, A58, C-Series, Uganda National Archives (henceforth UNA).

23 Fredrick Peter Batala Nayenga, 'Busoga in the Era of Catastrophes, 1898-1911,' in *Ecology and History in East Africa*, 2, ed. Bethwell Allan Ogot and J.A. Kieran (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 2011), 161.

country (Bunha) and capital (Bukaleba) as the headquarters of Busoga and the entire Eastern Province.<sup>24</sup> However, the outbreak of sleeping sickness impacted, with deadly consequences, the fortunes of southern Busoga. For instance, by the 1940s, 'Bunyuli and Bunha were abandoned because sleeping sickness had decimated the population.'<sup>25</sup> By 1912, Gabula's country (Bugabula), the most populated and the least affected by sleeping sickness, had a population of 72,000, followed in 1913 by Tabingwa's country (Luuka) with 20,000.<sup>26</sup> The Sub-commissioner's Report of May 30, 1902 illustrated the number of the natives who had so far been killed by sleeping sickness.

**Table 1.1 Sub-commissioner's Report on the number of deaths due to sleeping sickness**

S/N	Area	No. of deaths
01	Gabula's country (Bugabula)	16
02	Tabingwa's country (Luuka)	35
03	Zibondo's country (Bulamogi)	-
04	Nkono's country (Bukono)	-
05	Kapalaga's country	70
06	Wakooli's country (Bukooli)	2,600
07	Iganga's country (Iganga)	163
08	Nanyumba's country (Bunyuli)	3,680
09	Mbabani's country	463
10	Luba's country (Bunha)	800
11	Menha's country (Bugweri)	450
12	Obodha's country (Kigulu)	327
13	Waguma's country	75
14	Kisiki's country (Busiki)	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>8,662</b>

*Source: Fred Peter Batala Nayenga, An Economic History of the Lacustrine States of Busoga, 1750-1939, Unpublished copy of a PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1976, pp.172*

24 Nayenga, 'Busoga in the Era of Catastrophes,' 168.

25 Provincial Commissioner, Eastern Province, Report on Busoga Administrative Units, Clan Areas, September 6, 1944, Box 22, A58, C-Series, UNA.

26 The Rev. H. Mathers, A Christian Chief, *The Church Missionary Gleaner*, East Africana, Makerere University Library, December 2, 1912 and, Conquered by Christ, *The Church Missionary Gleaner*, East Africana, Makerere University, January 1, 1913.

The above table shows the chiefdoms of Bukooli, Bunyuli and Bunha, all found in southern Busoga, as the most affected by sleeping sickness while the North was least affected, with Bulamogi and Bukono recording zero deaths. However, Nayenga contends that 8,662 was too small a figure to be accepted as true. Instead, he argues that sleeping sickness claimed over 100,000 lives in Busoga between 1899 and 1905.<sup>27</sup> Nayenga's position is informed by the adopted method of counting the dead as decided by the colonial administration. For instance, chiefs were ordered to put aside a stick for each individual who died of sleeping sickness.<sup>28</sup> Twenty sticks would, therefore, mean that twenty people had died of sleeping sickness. Nayenga faults this method because it only catered for the victims who were reported to the chiefs; yet, a number of deaths might have gone unreported.<sup>29</sup> Second, chiefs might have also been hesitant to report the male victims since their pay depended on the number of male tax payers in their chiefdoms.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of the uncertainty shrouding the exact number of sleeping sickness victims in Busoga, it is evident that the disease had a great impact on the region, causing deaths, misery, dislocation, and migration of inhabitants.

Cuthbert Christy, an early twentieth century European traveller and witness of the horrific upsurge of sleeping sickness describes the pandemic in the following dreadful terms:

It begins very insidiously. The unfortunate native feels an unaccountable weakness, and lassitude, accompanied by frontal headache. After a time, he becomes morose and indifferent, is slow in all his movements, his face bears a frowning, painful expression, and he is drowsy. In a month or so, the weakness has much increased, he is unable to work, and always wants to sit down, his expression becomes vacant, almost idiotic, and his face and lips puffy. Later, his whole body becomes puffy and bloated, he cannot walk without the aid of a stick, and in trying to sit down he frequently falls in a heap without being able to save himself. His skin loses its vitality, and becomes filthy, his movements are jerky, his speech thick and muddled, saliva dribbles from the corners of his mouth, and he is so sleepy that he frequently dozes in the act of taking food. At the end of five or six months or more, terrible sores develop on his body, sleep overpowers all else, the wretched victim, unable to help himself in any way, becomes emaciated, and lies huddled up in his hut, oblivious of everything around him, in a state of deep lethargy, till death ends his sufferings. Sometimes a whole family are thus affected, with painful apparent results, when in the later stages, the members are unable to help each other.<sup>31</sup>

27 Fredrick Peter Batala Nayenga, *An Economic History of the Lacustrine States of Busoga, Uganda: 1750 to 1939* (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, United States of America, 1976), 173.

28 Ibid., 173.

29 Ibid., 173.

30 Ibid., 173.

31 Cuthbert Christy, 'Sleeping Sickness,' *African Affairs*, 3, no. 9 (October 1903): 5.



Christy's observation underscores the agonising effect of sleeping sickness on Busoga's population. His narrative portrays the pandemic as not only devastating upon the affected individual but also a cause of intermittent infirmity which hampered economic production and left numerous families vulnerable to starvation. A sick population, in an economy which largely depended on agriculture and trade, became incapable of undertaking any economic initiative. It is no surprise, therefore, that side by side with disease, were cycles of famine which altogether added to the decimation of the population of southern Busoga and forced the survivors to evacuate.

The decimation of the local population affected the colonial government's treasury which immensely relied on taxation from the 'natives' to meet its administrative expenses. Thus, in order to solve the problem of increasing administrative costs amidst a slimming population, government merged the counties of Bunyuli, Bunha, and Butembe into one unit, promising that 'they would be restored to their status if each of them raised a population of 10,000.'<sup>32</sup> However, that took long to be realised. For instance, in 1952, the *kyabazinga* of Busoga requested the Governor of Uganda Protectorate, Sir Benjamin Andrew Cohen, to restore Bunha to a county status because it had at least, raised a population of 5,000 people.<sup>33</sup> This population demise was not only limited to Busoga but the entire Lake Victoria region. Mari Webel notes, for instance, 'tens of thousands of people died around Lake Victoria alone in the first few years of the 1900s.'<sup>34</sup> Areas of northern German East Africa, the ancient Karagwe Kingdom, Maasai stretch, the islands and shores of Lake Victoria, particularly Ssesse, Buvuma, and the entire stretch of southern Busoga, were severely devastated and their surviving populations dislocated.<sup>35</sup> The resultant dislocations and migrations blurred the boundaries of the chronic conflicting independent chiefdoms and stirred the processes of social integration in colonial East Africa.

### Theoretical Debates on Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity is a definite fact of life, as individuals, groups, and communities both continuously define themselves and are defined within certain specific social niches from which they derive their cultural uniqueness. As John Lonsdale writes, 'ethnicity is always with us; it makes us moral- and thus social beings.'<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, different schools of thought, ranging from history, anthropology, sociology, and political science seeking to provide a substantial understanding of society and, or humanity, have considered as key, the facet of ethnic identity. All these disciplinary variations embed a troika of theoretical elucidations of ethnic identity spanning from constructivism to instrumentalism and atavistic primordialism.

According to the advocates of the constructivist theory, ethnic identity is a

32 M. Kigumba, On behalf of Abataka Abasiki, Namutumba, Busembatya, Petition to the Governor of Uganda Protectorate for the restoration of 'Our Counties,' August 30, 1942, Box 22, A58, C-Series, UNA.

33 Office of the Kyabazinga, Bugembe, Busoga, Letter to the Governor of Uganda Protectorate, n.d. File 4, Box 2, Jinja District Archive (henceforth JDA).

34 Mari K. Webel, *The Politics of Disease Control: Sleeping Sickness in Eastern Africa, 1890 to 1920* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2019), 2.

35 Christy, 'Sleeping Sickness,' 9; Kirk Arden Hoppe, 'Lords of the Fly: Colonial Visions and Revisions of African Sleeping-Sickness Environments on Ugandan Lake Victoria, 1906-1961,' *Journal of the International African Institute* 67, no. 1 (1997): 92; Waller, 'Ecology, Migration and Expansion in East Africa,' 354.

36 John Lonsdale, 'Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism,' *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism* Occasional Paper, no. 11 (1994), 132.

perpetual phenomenal process whose mutation varies with certain specific contexts. Berman, for instance, portrays ethnicity as a historical progression which is 'grounded in the past and perpetually in the process of formation.'<sup>37</sup> The past, in this regard, denotes the colonial period during which ethnic identities formed as the pre-colonial African societies reacted to the emerging social, economic, cultural, and political forces orchestrated by the colonial state.<sup>38</sup> Driven by the desire to maximize tax collection from their African subjects, the colonial officials imposed restrictions on movements, fixed interior borderlines, and encouraged indigenous allegiances. Indigenous chiefs, acting in support of the colonial enterprise, solidified ethnic consciousness.<sup>39</sup> However, the tendency to meet the economic and political aims of the colonial state also reveals the manipulative aspect of ethnic makers which ultimately unravels the notion of political instrumentalism as supplementary to ethno-social constructivism. Subsequently, both constructivism and political instrumentalism encompass significant familiar overlaps that are fundamental to the subject of ethnicity.

Joane Nagel, for instance, construed ethnicity as a consequence of 'strategic calculations.... arising out resource competition.'<sup>40</sup> Resources, including power, are scarce in nature; and those in control often tend to distribute it only to their trusted and loyal subjects while excluding their potential opponents.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, the latter would counter their exclusion by mobilizing and building political niches among their loyalties in order to gain access to the scarce resources.<sup>42</sup> Political instrumentalists, as ethnic engineers, often create ethnic consciousness by attaching new meanings to selected aspects of ethnic symbolism as befits certain specific contexts.<sup>43</sup> However, ethnic instrumentalism cannot be construed in the same context as atavistic primordialism. However, Lentz argues that the attachment of emotional attributes and the manipulation of cultural symbols to the concept of ethnicity portrays the theory of instrumentalism as a distinct version of the primordial model. For instance, both theories hold the central view of cultural identity as constituting 'a primal basis, an imminent, enduring essence that is bound to express itself as soon as its bearers find cause or occasion to assert common interests.'<sup>44</sup>

Primordialism focuses on natural traits and social groups of individuals as salient features of ethnic formation processes. For instance, according to Lentz, ethnic groups are 'basic groups of identity which all members inherit at birth and which satisfy the human need for belongingness and self-esteem much better than the secondary group identities acquired later in life.'<sup>45</sup> The fundamental value of the

37 Bruce J. Berman, 'Ethnic Patronage and the African State: The Politics of Uncivil Nationalism,' *African Affairs*, no. 97 (1998): 312.

38 Ibid., 305.

39 Lonsdale, 'Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism,' 134.

40 Joane Nagel, 'Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture,' *Oxford University Press* 41, no. 1 (February 1994): 158.

41 John Lonsdale, 'Moral Ethnicity, Ethnic Nationalism and Political Tribalism: the case of the Kikuyu' in *Staat Und Gesellschaft in Africa: Erosions-Und Reformprozesse*, ed. Peter Meyns (Hamburg: LIT, 1996), 99.

42 Thomas Spear, 'Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa,' *Journal of African History* 44 no. 1 (2003): 17.

43 Kataria Shyamal, 'Explaining Ethnicity: Primordialism Vs Instrumentalism,' *Society for Science and Education* 5, no. 4 (2018): 133.

44 Carol Lentz, 'Tribalism and Ethnicity in Africa. A Review of Four Decades of Anglophone Research,' *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines* 31, no. 2, 1995, 307.

45 Ibid., 306.



biological assumption of ethnic identity, therefore, lies in its potential to provide comfort in times of adversity 'since the involuntary identity acquired at birth requires none of the efforts that one's other voluntary forms of belonging demands.'<sup>46</sup> Subsequently, 'language, religious beliefs, rituals, oral traditions, and other aspects of material culture' serve as ethnic minting tools among members of the biologically related social context.<sup>47</sup>

Primordial discourses, therefore, fathom pre-colonial Africa as 'a land of tribes, each united by language, modes of subsistence, kinship, political chiefship, cultural practice and religious observance, all of which separated each tribe from its neighbours.'<sup>48</sup> Primordialism, thus, justifies the European colonisation of Africa, dubbing ethnicity as 'a cultural ghost, ...an atavistic residue deriving from the distant past of rural Africa...that should have evaporated with the passage of time but continued to disobey laws of social and political change.'<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, ethnicity signifies a 'retrogressive and shameful, unwelcome interruption of the pursuit of modernity.'<sup>50</sup> Primordialists, therefore, showcase the African ethnic problem as an 'African thing' that gains its poignant clout from within the perimeters of 'common ancestry' and 'culture' built on the wheels of blood relations, acting in defence of societal interests.<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, such attributes had to give way to the modernisation efforts of colonialism 'by exposure to markets, towns, literacy and bureaucratic value' but regrettably did not.<sup>52</sup>

I argue that the primordial tendency to interpret pre-colonial Africa as atavistic, conflict-ridden, and ruled within the narrow confines of kin and kith, though not entirely false, is largely exaggerated and habitually misconstrued. Pre-colonial African societies constituted integral niches of diverse genders, generations, lineages, clans and cultures that stretched beyond the narrow confines of kin and kith.<sup>53</sup> As Berman further remarks, larger states were normally 'multi-lingual and multi-cultural, pulling together diverse communities under political sovereignties of widely varying effectiveness.'<sup>54</sup> For instance, according to Doyle, the Buganda society was organized in a way that even 'captured territories were energetically incorporated through the establishment of networks of chiefship and clientage that centred on the Kabaka, ensuring that royal authority was felt almost as strongly on the periphery as in the capital.'<sup>55</sup>

Both socio-cultural and territorial boundaries were so flexible that pre-colonial Africans 'existed within a reality of multiple overlapping and alternative collective identities.'<sup>56</sup> A marked degree of trustworthiness existed between the people

46 Lonsdale, 'Moral Ethnicity, Ethnic Nationalism and Political Tribalism,' 94.

47 Elizabeth MacGonagle, *Crafting Identity in Zimbabwe and Mozambique* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 18.

48 Lonsdale, 'Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism,' 132.

49 Berman, 'Ethnic Patronage and the African State,' 306.

50 Ibid., 306.

51 Spear, 'Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention,' 17.

52 Lonsdale, 'Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism,' 132.

53 Berman, 'Ethnic Patronage and the African State,' 310.

54 Ibid., 311.

55 Shane Doyle, 'Immigrants and Indigenes: The Lost Counties Dispute and the Evolution of Ethnic Identity in Colonial Buganda,' *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3, no. 2 (2009): 288.

56 Berman, 'Ethnic Patronage and the African State,' 310.

at the centre and those at the periphery, with each playing diverse social obligations to the sustenance of the concerned societies.<sup>57</sup> Inter-societal integration was often negotiated through a crescendo of marriage alliances, concubinage and inter-trade interactions as was the case of the nineteenth century emerging Luo communities and Bantu-speaking cultivators in eastern Uganda as well as among the Yoruba and Shona communities.<sup>58</sup> Uzoigwe's study demonstrates the immigrating Luo clans as easily absorbed, integrated and *bantunized* into Bantu-Basoga owing to the latter's superior material culture which gave them precedence over the 'newcomers.'

In pre-colonial Buganda, for instance, territorial conquest and annexation was part of the strategies of socio-political integration as evidenced in the case of ancient Bunyoro's lands of Bugerere, Kyaggwe, and Buddu. Perhaps the most striking aspect of integration was the eventual annexation and *gandisation* of the ancient kingdom of Kooki at the close of the nineteenth century.<sup>59</sup> The Yoruba and Shona societies equally comprised various multi-linguistically and multi-culturally diverse inhabitants who consequently became Yoruba and Shona, respectively.<sup>60</sup> Distinguished fighters were also integrated and assimilated so as to ensure sustainable wars of defence and conquest of territory. Pre-colonial Buganda, for instance, integrated distinguished fighters from the Busoga chiefdoms among whom was Badankayine and Muziramulungi.<sup>61</sup> Equally significant in the same initiative was the Bulamogi state in north-eastern Busoga which often integrated a number of Teso warriors to curtail Buganda military attack.<sup>62</sup>

## Moral Ethnicity

The unprecedented boundary openness, socio-cultural fusion, and peculiar flexibility, as well as incessant accommodation and assiduous integration formed a colossal expression of moral ethnicity. According to Lonsdale, moral ethnicity, characteristic of pre-colonial Africa, constituted 'common humane instinct to create out of the daily habits of social intercourse and material labour a system of moral meaning and ethical reputation within a more or less imagined community.'<sup>63</sup> In retrospect, unlike the colonial-born vice of political tribalism, pre-colonial ethnic invention was intended to meet the emerging needs of society. Lonsdale compares moral ethnicity to nationalism in an epistemic contravention of what he terms as 'the unprincipled political tribalism with which groups compete for public resources.'<sup>64</sup>

As a form of nationalism, therefore, moral ethnicity encapsulated 'an

57 Lucy Tse, 'The Effects of Ethnic Identity Formation on Attitudes towards Ethnic Language Development,' A Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, 8 April 1996, 3.

58 G.N Uzoigwe, 'The Beginnings of Lango Society: A Review of Evidence,' *Historical Society of Nigeria* 6, no. 4 (June 1973): 406; David William Cohen, 'The Political Transformation of Northern Busoga, 1600-1900,' *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 22, no. 87/88 (1982): 470; Berman, 'Ethnic Patronage and the African State,' 410.

59 Aiden Stonehouse, 'The Bakooki in Buganda: Identity and Assimilation on the Peripheries of a Ugandan Kingdom,' *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 6, no. 3 (2012): 528.

60 Berman, 'Ethnic Patronage and the African State,' 310.

61 William FitzSimons, 'Warfare, Competition and the Durability of Political Smallness in Nineteenth Century Busoga,' *The Journal of African History* 59, no. 1 (2018), 57.

62 FitzSimons, 'Warfare, Competition and the Durability of Political Smallness,' 57; David Hannington Okalany, 'The Baganda Invasion of Teso, Pallisa and Tororo,' *Mawazo Journal of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University* 10, no. 3 (September 2011): 25.

63 Lonsdale, 'Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism,' 132.

64 *Ibid.*, 131.

intellectually imaginative political project of liberation' through which communities 'co-existed in a non-competitive manner.'<sup>65</sup> Complementarity overrode competition for resources in a plethora of polygonal dialectal and social landscape in which relations thrived on exchange of specialized products with 'fission and fusion like shives of glass in a kaleidoscope.'<sup>66</sup> David William Cohen, in his seminal works on Busoga's pre-colonial political development noted the prevalent 'networks of production and exchange relations which included movements and consumption of food supplies as well as livestock across the wider Busoga region.'<sup>67</sup> Thus, despite the intricate superfluity of Luo-related and Bantu languages and cultural histories, diverse indigenous rulers promoted the inter-regional barter exchanges of 'such goods as backcloth, pottery, iron wares, ...foodstuffs and livestock' in complementary relations rather than competitive rivalries.<sup>68</sup>

Economic aspirations were simultaneously fostered alongside copious and reciprocal social obligations in times of disaster occurrences. Cohen notes, for instance, that 'during localized famine, people suffering from hunger sought out...nodal figures who had, through using broader networks of support, created surpluses from a wider, more diversified zone of production, surpluses which could be distributed to the hungry in return for goods and services - and in return for women who would serve as wives or concubines or would be introduced to supporters, thus reinforcing the affinal networks already functioning.'<sup>69</sup>

The continuous socioeconomic interactions fundamentally reduced tensions and adversity among the historically diverse, politically independent, and culturally differentiated Busoga states and cultivated the sense of moral conscience up to the advent of British colonial rule at the close of the nineteenth century. The ethic of moral ethnicity emerged strongly in the late nineteenth century as epidemics and famines in southern Busoga drove people to less affected northern states. Pre-colonial boundary flexibility allowed these migrants to integrate, even rising to leadership. By the early twentieth century, a shared ethno-political identity—Busoga—had formed. This article uses the concept of moral ethnicity to examine how epidemics shaped Busoga's ethnic identity between 1880 and 1912.

Marwick emphasizes that successful historical inquiry relies on systematic source study. This article uses both secondary and primary sources to explore how epidemics shaped ethnicity in East Africa. Secondary sources provide key context, while primary accounts, such as Church Missionary archives, reveal missionary responses to epidemics. Equally important are the colonial records available in the Confidential Minute Series of the Uganda National Archives that offer descriptive narratives about the colonial confrontation with the epidemics at the inception of British imperial rule in East Africa. The critical interrogation of archival relics is fundamental to unravelling 'the cultural, social, political, technical and scientific aspects' of the agency and phenomenon under investigation.<sup>70</sup> However, most of the

65 Ibid., 136.

66 Ibid., 136-137.

67 Cohen, 'The Political Transformation of Northern Busoga,' 471.

68 Ibid., 478.

69 Ibid., 471.

70 Michelle Caswell, "'The Archive' is Not An Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies," ed. Andrew Prescott and Alison Wiggins, Oxford University Press, *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1 (2016): 4.

archival materials are often influenced by the author's perception and interpretation of reality.<sup>71</sup> In this case, therefore, most of the colonial records might have been dictated by the colonial interests which ultimately impacted their interpretation of reality at that point in time. That is partly why Giblin regards colonial archival sources as incapable of yielding sufficient 'evidence of continuities of African thought and action.'<sup>72</sup> Archival challenges are further complicated by the colonial anxieties over records at the time of decolonisation.

Most of the colonial governments viewed records as potential incriminating tools that would later jeopardize the legacy of king and empire. Consequently, those records that were viewed as perilous 'were destroyed for fear that sensitive material would fall into the hands of their African successors.'<sup>73</sup> This argument corroborates with Taylor who reveals that the British imperial policy at the time of colonial disengagement entailed 'Operation Legacy' which meant 'concealing and destroying files across the Empire' under the pretext of 'preserving what will be of value to posterity.'<sup>74</sup> In line with Taylor, Peterson notes that 'Operation Legacy' was rather based on the British colonial conviction of 'not to pass on any material to African governments which may embarrass Her Majesty's Government.'<sup>75</sup> It is because of the above archival limitations that the study made wide use of secondary sources in order to compare sources and illuminate the broader context of African epidemics and ethnic identity.

## Evolution of Busoga Identity

The area between lakes Victoria and Kyoga as well as rivers Nile and Mpologoma, which would later become known as Busoga at the beginning of the twentieth century was formerly composed of independent chiefdoms which were occasionally at war against each other despite the continuum of socioeconomic exchange relations amongst them. Notable among the chiefdoms included Bugabula in the northwest, Bulamogi in the northeast, Bukooli in the southwest while Bunha, with its capital at Bukaleba port, commanding one of the strongest economies of the time, based on trade and prosperous agriculture, was situated further south adjoining Buvuma islands and Buganda Kingdom.<sup>76</sup> Thus, unlike Buganda Kingdom which formed a confederation of clans under one nominal ruler, the *Kabaka*, Busoga chiefdoms were ruled by different chiefs, each with his own capital, *embuga*, royal title, with mutual jealousies, rivalry, suspicion and intrigue which amounted to a constant condition of warfare that lasted until the onset of British colonial rule at the close of the nineteenth century.<sup>77</sup>

71 Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, Third Edition (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989), 206.

72 James Giblin, 'The Politics of Disease Control: Sleeping Sickness in Eastern Africa, 1890-1920,' *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 95, no. 3 (2021): 426.

73 John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London: Longman, 1984), 42.

74 Edgar Curtis Taylor, 'Risk and Labour in the Archives: Archival Futures from Uganda,' *Africa*, 91, no. 4, (2021): 536-37.

75 Derek R. Peterson, 'The Politics of Archives in Uganda,' in Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.982>.

76 Anthony D. Low, *Fabrication of Empire The British and the Uganda Kingdoms, 1890-1902* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 169; Nayenga, 'Busoga in the Era of Catastrophes, 1898-1911,' 168.

77 Low, *Fabrication of Empire*, 170; Samwiri Lwanga-Lunyiigo, *The Struggle for Land in Buganda: 1888-2005* (Kampala: Wavah Books, 2013), 150-51; FitzSimons, 'Warfare, Competition and the Durability of Political Smallness,' 49.

The absence of centralised authority was one fundamental weakness which, not only accelerated conflicts among the various chiefdoms, but also subjected Busoga to unprecedented, destructive raids. For instance, in *Bassekabaka Ba Buganda*, 'the Kings of Buganda,' Apolo Kaggwa narrates one of most tenacious Buganda expeditions conducted against Busoga chiefdoms during the reign of Kabaka Kamaanya who, according to Nakanyike Musisi, ruled from 1764-1794.<sup>78</sup> According to Kaggwa, the expedition under the command of Ssewamkambo, was known as 'Ekyetooloolo (one which goes around and covers the whole country) because the whole of Busoga was overrun,' as the *kabaka* commanded, 'massacre them all and save none.'<sup>79</sup> Similarly, David William Cohen gives another horrific account pertaining to Buganda campaign against Luuka, one of the Busoga's large chiefdoms in the mid-nineteenth century: 'During the Ganda campaign in Luuka and the humiliation of King Wambuzi, ...lives were broken, families were torn apart to feed the Buganda segment of the emerging nineteenth century slave trade. Mothers and daughters were seized for the courtiers of Buganda. Homes were ruined and food carried off. It was a period of upheaval and of fight.'<sup>80</sup>

At certain occasions, Buganda coopted some of the Basoga to betray and or fight their own chiefs. For instance, according Reverend SR. Skeens of the Church Missionary Society, 'A Musoga chief owing to some personal grudge could easily be persuaded to join the Baganda to fight against his brother-chief.'<sup>81</sup> Thus, in the cyclic trend of warfare, 'Sunnah II of Buganda co-opted Basoga warriors to go to war against Wakooli, a chief in southern Busoga; Walusansa, a county chief of Kigulu was betrayed by the Baganda who pretended to seek his help against his neighbouring chief, Musiki; and the Basoga were also present in Mutesa I's military campaign against the Bavuma Islanders, their hereditary and natural friends.'<sup>82</sup> Prevalent Buganda raids, therefore, left Busoga chiefdoms robbed, divided, and too weak to unite into a single formidable ethnic nation until the close of the nineteenth century.

The idea of a common identity among the Basoga, therefore, remained fluid until the late nineteenth century, a period marked by European colonial advent and the outbreak of epidemics and famines which ultimately redefined Busoga's socio-political landscape. In fact, the identity Busoga itself was a nineteenth century consequence of the Arab and Swahili trading networks radiating inland into the interior from the coast of East Africa.<sup>83</sup> Buganda's control of the coastward trade routes scaled Busoga within the orbit of Afro-Arab and Swahili linguistic networks.<sup>84</sup> Thus, as many kingdoms assumed the Swahili 'U' suffix, for instance, *Uganda* for Buganda and *Unyoro* for

78 Nakanyike B. Musisi, 'Women 'Elite Polygyny' and Buganda State Formation,' *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 769.

79 Apolo Kaggwa, *The Kings of Buganda (Bassekabaka Ba Buganda)*, a Translation by Ssemakula Kiwanuka (Nairobi: East African Publishing House Limited, 1971), 108.

80 David William Cohen, *Womunafu's Bunafu, A Study of Authority in a Nineteenth Century African Community* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), 82.

81 Rev. Sr. Skeens. Reminiscences of Busoga and its chiefs. *The Uganda Journal, the Organ of the Uganda Society* 6, no. 3, Kampala, (January 1937), 186.

82 Rev. SR. Skeens. 'Reminiscences of Busoga and its chiefs.' *The Uganda Journal, the Organ of the Uganda Society*, 4, no. 3 (January 1937).

83 Audrey I. Richards, *East African Chiefs: A Study of Political Development in Some Uganda and Tanganyika Tribes* (London: The East African Institute of Social Research, 1960), 78.

84 Ralph A. Austen, 'Patterns of Development in Nineteenth Century East Africa,' *African Historical Studies* 4, no. 3 (1971): 656.



Bunyoro, so was Busoga also identified with the same as *Usoga*.<sup>85</sup> The etymology was derived from specific two hills which still remain important symbols of ethnic heritage among the Basoga. For instance, according to Nayenga, ‘the name Busoga was in the first instance used to refer to a hill located in the south-central part of the country and later it became identified with a state known as “Busoga.”’<sup>86</sup> The state, according to Nayenga, was Butembe, currently located in the south-west of Jinja and ruled by Ntembe’s dynasty of the Reedbuck clan.<sup>87</sup> Butembe was involved in political and economic adventures with the neighbouring Buganda and Bunyoro kingdoms during the nineteenth century, for which it became known throughout the East African interlacustrine region.<sup>88</sup> Thus, by the mid nineteenth century, the identity Usoga was in use such that when John Hanning Speke reached the source of the River Nile in 1862, he was told about Usoga as a region east of the Nile.<sup>89</sup>

However, a contrary account of Busoga etymology relates with Busoga Hill, located in Namakoko, Bukooli, as reported by one key respondent, Keith Mutengu: ‘Busoga derives its name from Busoga hill in Bukoli Chieftdom.’<sup>90</sup> Busoga Hill forms the ancestral homeland of one of Busoga’s largest clans, Abaisemusoga, and was significant in the British colonisation process of Busoga. For it was the location where the so called ‘blood brotherhood treaties’ were signed between Chief Wakooli Kaunhe and the British imperial agents, Lord Lugard and Fredrick Jackson in the early 1890s.<sup>91</sup> Despite these etymological connotations, there was no single Busoga ethnic entity, neither were there a people singularly identified as Basoga. The inhabitants of the land, therefore, often identified themselves according to their respective chiefdoms, as Bagabula, Balamogi, Bakigulu, Bagweri, and Basiki but not Basoga.<sup>92</sup> It was not until the later part of the nineteenth century, characterized by epidemic outbreaks, famine catastrophes amidst the rising tide of British colonial rule that a common idea of the Basoga as a single ethnic community evolved.

Busoga experienced severe catastrophes with a devastating impact on the population especially in the southern belt of the country. For instance, the famines of 1889-1901 struck the population which was already exhausted by the nineteenth century ‘inter-tribal’ warfare and Buganda military raids. The famines were in part caused by prolonged droughts which occurred in Busoga at the turn of the nineteenth century. The occurrence of droughts was a consequence of the rapidly growing population of humans and livestock which led to the misuse of land, thus plummeting ‘the moisture retention ability of the soil.’<sup>93</sup> Consequently, the first severe famine catastrophe struck between 1889 and 1890, and was followed by the second deadly wave between 1898 and 1901, literary known as *mugudya*, ‘chaser,’ because ‘it chased the people away from their home-states’ in search for livelihood.<sup>94</sup>

85 Low, *Fabrication of Empire*, 172.

86 Nayenga, *An Economic History of the Lacustrine States of Busoga*, 1.

87 Ibid., 1.

88 Ibid., 2.

89 Ibid., 2.

90 Keith Mutengu, interviewed by the author February 15, 2021, Mafubira, Jinja.

91 Richard Gonza Kayaga and Wilberforce Frank Nabwiso, *Evolution of Busoga’s Eleven Hereditary Chiefdoms and Kyabazingaship in Uganda, 1600-2016*. (Diocese of Jinja: Cultural Research Centre, 2016), 64.

92 Ogenza Otunnu, *Crisis of Legitimacy and Political Violence in Uganda, 1890 to 1979*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 97.

93 Nayenga, ‘Busoga in the Era of Catastrophes, 1898-1911,’ 162.

94 Ibid., 162; Yekoniya Kaira Lubogo, *History of Busoga* (Uganda: Marianum Press Ltd, 2020), 32.



According to Busoga's colonial era prominent administrator and chronicler of Busoga's past, Yekoniya Kaira Lubogo, *mugudya* bred unprecedented deaths, reducing the populations, particularly of southern Busoga, to below unimaginable levels. Ultimately, the survivors, including members of Luba's royal family, migrated to northern Busoga states, particularly, Bugabula, Bukono, Busiki, and Kigulu.<sup>95</sup> For instance, according to Henry Kisadha Kyemba, a key respondent in this study remarked: 'We belong to the house of Luba but migrated to Bugabula during the period of sleeping sickness pandemic in southern Busoga. This was the time when the colonial administration was evolving in Busoga. My father arrived at the court of Daudi Mutekanga who gave him his daughter as wife and even appointed him the *muluka* (parish) chief of Nakakabala.'<sup>96</sup>

The intermittent migrations and resettlement, therefore, ushered in the harmonisation of social relations across the region of Busoga. Immigrants were harmoniously accommodated by the ruling dynasties of the host states and some of them were incorporated into their administrative hierarchies as chiefs, creating a sense of a common identity among the Basoga.

In the course of social integration, Busoga experienced one of the deadliest revolts in British imperial history. The Nubians mercenaries who had played a fundamental role in the conquest of Bunyoro revolted against their British commanders in 1897. Caught by surprise, the British personnel on the ground in Busoga were helpless as the Nubians advanced, captured the fort of Bukaleba and killed various British officers, including the overall commander, Major Thruston, and his acquaintances, Norman Wilson and Engineer Scott.<sup>97</sup> The revolt was only defeated after the British deployment of 'the 27<sup>th</sup> Bombay Light Infantry and a wing of the 4<sup>th</sup> Bombay Infantry, ...and the a permanent Indian contingent' as well as the interminable mobilisation of indigenous loyalist Africans.<sup>98</sup> Though defeated, the revolt bred a state of uncertainty, panic and tension which made the people fail to plan and engage productively in agriculture as the main source of livelihood. According to Koponen, 'like war and famine, disease and famine often coincided.'<sup>99</sup> Thus, as Busoga floundered in a state of war, terror, and famines, it was hit by diverse pandemics of sleeping sickness, jiggers, smallpox, and gonorrhoea. It is revealed, for instance, in one of the official colonial records that 'Busoga was hit by a crescendo of pandemics at the turn of the century (beginning of the twentieth century); sleeping sickness which killed 90,000 people especially in southern Busoga, smallpox and a big famine in 1908.'<sup>100</sup> The conglomeration of catastrophes was set to have a lasting ethno-socio impact as the natives were decimated while the remnants relocated and resettled in the less affected northern parts of Busoga.

Africans believed sleeping sickness, which they thought affected only the indigenous population, was deliberately introduced by the British to depopulate and seize Busoga land. Nayenga argues this view deserves critical consideration, noting

95 Lubogo, *History of Busoga*, 32.

96 Henry Kisadha Kyemba, interviewed by the author February 5, 2021, Magwa, Jinja.

97 Samuel Rubaraza Karugire, *A Political History of Uganda* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2010), 95.

98 Low, *Fabrication of Empire*, 202.

99 Koponen, 'War, Famine and Pestilence in Late Pre-Colonial Tanzania,' 670.

100 CIJ Hastie, Welfare Report on the Work in Busoga, 19 December 1947, Box 1, File 5, JDA.

that after the Nubian mutiny, the Basoga endured harsh conditions, including forced long-distance treks. Without proper transport, they were ordered to walk to Voi, Kenya, carrying soldiers' baggage—leaving them exhausted, immuno-compromised, and vulnerable to unfamiliar diseases they later spread upon returning home.

Initially, the colonial government looked on helplessly as people collapsed and died due to the sleeping sickness pandemic. It was not until the arrival of the medical team from Britain led by Dr. Albert Cook and Colonel David Bruce in 1903, which investigated and found out that sleeping sickness, *trypanosome gambiense* was transferred from an infected person to a healthy one by a species of tsetse fly, *glossina palpalis*.<sup>101</sup> At first, the colonial government had no idea on how to combat the disease, as the Archdeacon Walker noted: 'neither the fully qualified surgeon nor doctor could at present fully cope.' The protectorate government was only able to set up a health care centre for the sleeping sickness patients at Iganga where the victims were carried, tied to poles but many of them died of exhaustion and hunger before even reaching the facility.<sup>102</sup> The desperate victims of hunger and disease, no longer stuck to their pre-colonial socio-political exclusivities, left their indigenous areas and migrated to diverse states of Busoga socially identifying with the host natives forming the precursor to a common ethno-identity creation. As Waller writes, 'refugees were always welcomed and became dependants and wives in their host households.'<sup>103</sup> Such unprecedented migrations and resettlements distorted the pre-colonial boundaries, creating a condition of emerging social cohesion, out of which sprung the ethno-identity pool of the Basoga people.

The sleeping sickness pandemic intensified profusely, leading to unprecedented devastation and depopulation especially in southern Busoga. Indeed, for most of the colonial period, southern Busoga was often referred to as 'the sleeping sickness area.'<sup>104</sup> The more the natives abandoned their homes, the more 'bush invaded their abandoned fields and so did the tsetse fly.'<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, the arrival of Sir Hesketh Bell, as British Governor to Uganda, on March 1, 1906 caused some improvements. Bell was so much alarmed by the rampant deaths of the natives that he ordered for their evacuation from the shores of Lake Victoria which were infested with the *glossina palpalis*. He emphasised: 'We must withdraw from the insects: the source of their infection. The whole country must be depopulated. There seems to me to be no other course of action than to remove everyone from reach of the fly for an indefinite period,' as cited in Headrick.<sup>106</sup> Throughout his tour of duty, Bell spent almost all his efforts combating the disease, as he noted, 'The sleeping sickness problem overshadowed everything else of my work here.'<sup>107</sup> Bell's ambition was to have all the people evacuated to fly-free areas away from the shores of Lake Victoria and to have the whole of southern Busoga and other infested areas cordoned off from human settlement. He even forbade fishing, hunting, and the collection of firewood

101 Nayenga, 'Busoga in the Era of Catastrophes, 1898-1911,' 166-73.

102 Archdeacon Walker, *Church Missionary Gleaner*, East Africana, Makerere University Library, April 1, 1912).

103 Waller, 'Ecology, Migration and Expansion in East Africa,' 354.

104 Provincial Commissioner for Eastern Province, Memo to the Ag. Chief Secretary, May 4, 1948, A58, C-Series, UNA.

105 Headrick, 'Sleeping Sickness Epidemics and Colonial Responses in East and Central Africa, 1900-1940,' 4.

106 Ibid., 4.

107 Ibid., 1.

in the cordoned off areas.<sup>108</sup>

A corroborative scrutiny of archival records reveals that the '[n]atives were removed because of the infestation of the area by tsetse flies causing sleeping sickness, but were promised resettlement after European doctors had sprayed and killed the tsetse flies.'<sup>109</sup> However, a critical analysis of certain archival material reveals that until the 1940s, southern Busoga remained uninhabited. For instance, Zefaniya Munaba, Abataka President, wrote to Governor Sir Charles Dundas in 1948, contesting the extraction of minerals in southern Busoga by the European under the guise of constructing boreholes and roads in an uninhabited area. He noted: 'Minerals are exploited in Southern Busoga by Europeans under the cover of making boreholes, roads. If the boreholes are being dug in aid of the inhabitants in difficulty of getting water, the Europeans should turn to other parts of Busoga like Butembe county, Luwuka and Bulamogi where the difficulty of water is at crisis. The road that is being made in Bunya is that from Kityerera to Ijaguzo island and from Kityerera to Majanji. Why are those roads being made in a country uninhabited?'<sup>110</sup> Munaba's letter underpins the natives' perception about sleeping sickness and Bell's resettlement schemes as deliberate European inventions aimed at the grabbing of African land.

Bell's second alternative was to create concentration camps, prominent of which was Busu where the sleeping sickness patients were resettled and provided with food and medicines.<sup>111</sup> However, the conditions in the camp proved equally fruitless as the patients were attacked and devoured by wild animals.<sup>112</sup> Bell would later admit the failure of actions, as quoted in Nayenga: 'Everyone who went into the camps seemed to die sooner or later. And it was evident that the natives placed little faith in our efforts to cure them.'<sup>113</sup> Bell's efforts, therefore, radical as they were, apart from coming late when numerous lives had already been lost, were more of a gamble than a realistically planned course of action. Nevertheless, the destructive impact of the epidemics and the arbitrary remedies of the colonial state reinforced the already ongoing process of social integration as the varied sub-groups fused together against antecedents of decades of pre-colonial hostilities and warfare.

Bell also took advantage of the heightened social distresses and weakened indigenous resistance strength to restructure Busoga into formidable counties with the intention of effecting colonial control. Ultimately, although the pre-colonial Busoga territory constituted more than sixty independent states of differing sizes and varied histories, Bell managed to create a nine-county administrative structure which became effective on April 1, 1906.<sup>114</sup> The imposed structure became fully defined in the Official Gazette of 1912 in which the then Governor, Fredrick Jackson, declared

108 Ibid., 1.

109 Abataka Abasoga, 'Letter to the Governor, 8 October 1949, A58, C-Series, UNA.

110 Zefaniya Munaba as President of and on behalf of Abataka Abazaliranwa Ab'ensikirano, Busoga, Letter to His Excellency, the Governor of Uganda Protectorate, 19 April 1948, Box 26, A56, C-Series, UNA.

111 Nayenga, *An Economic History of the Lacustrine States of Busoga*, 170.

112 Ibid., 171.

113 Ibid., 171.

114 Cohen, Womunafu's Bunafu, 6; Michael Twaddle, *Kakungulu and the Creation of Uganda, 1868-1928* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1993), 224.

Busoga a territory of the Basoga, radiating between lakes Victoria and Kyoga on the south and north, and rivers Nile and Mpologoma on the west and east, respectively.<sup>115</sup>

## Conclusion

This study examines how epidemics played a key role in shaping a unified Busoga ethnic identity from diverse socio-political groups at the turn of the twentieth century. Using the theory of moral ethnicity, it highlights how shared hardships fostered social integration based on indigenous African relationships. It argues that ethnic identity in Africa is more influenced by lived social realities than by colonial or political manipulation. Challenging constructivist and instrumentalist views, the study shows that in Busoga, colonial influence on identity formation was minimal. Instead, repeated epidemics and famines weakened resistance, dissolved social divisions, and fostered a shared identity later formalized by the colonial administration.

## Acknowledgements:

The authors would like to thank CODESRIA for their initial comments and reviews and for supporting Musamba in presenting the first draft at the sixteenth General Assembly (CODESRIA) in Dakar, Senegal, December 2023.

---

115 B.F.C Childs-Clarke; District Commissioner, Busoga; Amalgamation of Counties in Busoga, A memo to the Provincial Commissioner of Eastern Province; Dauncey Tongue, November 24, 1944, C-Series, Box 22, A-58, UNA.