

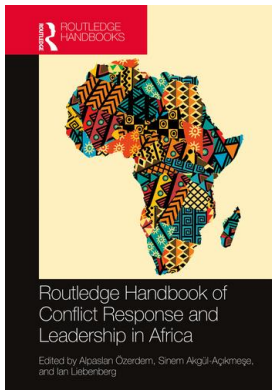
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RWENZORI IN UGANDA

The failures of reconciliation

*Stefano Ruzza***Introduction**

In July 2014, several districts in the Rwenzori region (Western Uganda) were affected by a series of violent attacks launched by youth affiliated with a local cultural institution, the Rwenzururu Kingdom (Obusinga bwa Rwenzururu [OBR]). Violence was mainly directed against government personnel and facilities, but it also hit across ethnic lines and soon converted into communal violence between two major groups living in the region, the Bakonzo and the Baamba. Ultimately, the attacks and their aftermaths were responsible for the death of about 100 people according to official accounts, but alternative sources estimated fatalities to be two or three times higher (Bariyo 2014; Human Rights Watch 2014; New Vision 2014a, 2014b; USAID 2014: 7–10).

After the events, the government hastily launched a rehabilitation programme, which ended with the amnesty of about 500 persons (Asiimwe and Nzinjah 2014). This notwithstanding, after the general elections of 2016, there were further clashes between Bakonzo and other groups, as well as new attacks against government installation in the Bundibugyo and Kasese districts of the Rwenzori region, which generated dozens of deaths. Things worsened later in the year, with incidents causing the death of another 100 persons (according to official figures) and the jailing of Rwenzururu King Charles Wesley Mumbere under more than 40 charges, including murder, terrorism, and treason. More than 150 of his subjects were imprisoned as well. At the time of writing (February 2021), the trial has not been celebrated yet, and some of those who had been jailed had died in prison in the meantime (Buchanan 2016; Nakato 2017; Nyeko 2018; The Observer 2019; Kanyere 2021).

The reemergence of violence in 2016 is a clear sign of a failure at conflict transformation in the aftermath of the July 2014 attacks. The reasons for such a failure can be traced to issues of leadership, and this chapter investigates them in two main areas: the ethnicization of politics and the flaws and limits of the reconciliation process itself. The chapter is structured as follows. The next section focuses on the history of the Rwenzururu movement, an autonomist group that was active between 1962 and 1982 in the Rwenzori, providing essential background by tracing the sources of contention and spontaneous violent mobilization in the history of the Rwenzori region. Then, each of the following two sections is devoted to one of the main areas constituting the analysis: the ethnicization of politics and the structure and limits of the reconciliation

process. The last part of this chapter concludes on rising concerns about the persistence of cycles of violence in the region. Besides published sources, this chapter avails of 13 semi-structured interviews with people directly involved in the attacks (including two ringleaders), representatives of the main cultural institutions involved in the events (the Rwenzururu Kingdom and the Baamba Kingdom, Obudhingiya bwa Bwamba [OBB]), civil servants, members of civil society interested in the processes of rehabilitation and reconciliation, and politicians. Most of the interviews were conducted directly in the Rwenzori region in December 2015. A couple of incidents happened while the fieldwork was ongoing, providing unexpected but relevant further information. To protect sources, the empirical material is used in anonymous form. A list of the interviews, providing the interviewees' roles as well as dates and places of the interviews, is provided in the section dedicated to sources and bibliography.

From a common struggle to a divisive history: the Rwenzururu movement

The cultural institution known as the Rwenzururu Kingdom occupies the central stage in the recent vicissitudes of the Rwenzori region. But to understand what the Rwenzururu Kingdom is about and why its existence is contentious, it is necessary to take one step back in time and tackle the history of its predecessor, the Rwenzururu movement. This was a secessionist/autonomist organization active in the Rwenzori region from 1962 to 1982, composed of Bakonzo and Baamba. The brief history of the movement provided here is based on information gathered through interviews, as well as from the books authored by Bwambale and Kyaminyawandi (2000) and by Doornbos (2018).

The Rwenzururu movement was born when Uganda was still dominated by the British. Using a divide-and-rule system of government, the colonialists empowered one specific kingdom, the Batoro, to rule over Bakonzo and Baamba. Hence, the two latter groups federated under the lead of three men, one Mukonzo (Isaya Mukirania) and two Baamba (Yeremiya Kawamara and Petero Mupalya), to fight both Batoro domination and the colonial government in Kampala. The Bakonzo were the majority in the Rwenzururu movement, reflecting the fact they are a larger group than the Baamba.

After Uganda achieved independence, the Rwenzururu movement continued its struggle since traditional kingdoms, thus including the Batoro's, remained part of Uganda's system of governance up until 1967. The Rwenzururu movement acted in a remote mountainous border area where Kampala's government struggled to reach with positive effects, hence gained in legitimacy among both Bakonzo and Baamba. Consequently, it survived even after kingdoms were abolished, although people within the movement had different ideas about the goals to be pursued from there on. For hardliners, it had to be independence from Kampala's government, while for moderates, some degree of autonomy would have been enough. Interestingly, the political divergence aligned only partially with ethnic lines. While Baamba were generally moderates, Bakonzo could go both ways, with lowland Bakonzo often leaning toward moderate positions and highland Bakonzo toward more radical ones.

The cleavage between hardliners and moderates became manifest in the late 1970s, as Idi Amin carved two new districts in the Rwenzori region out of lands previously subject to Batoro rule: Kasese and Bundibugyo (at the time known as Semliki). This generated a split in the Rwenzururu movement, because the increased autonomy was enough to appease moderates but not hardliners. To those who decided to remain in arms, appeasers were traitors of the common cause. Furthermore, the very creation of districts generated a new element of potential friction. There is an overwhelming Bakonzo majority in the district of Kasese, while in the

district of Bundibugyo, Bakonzo and Baamba are closer in numbers. Hence, when local government is seen under an ethnic lens, who should govern in Bundibugyo becomes contentious. To some Baamba, it should be “their” district since the Bakonzo rule Kasese. To some Bakonzo, the closeness of numbers implies a potential right to govern over Bundibugyo as well, or at least over some fractions of its territory. This contention is also at the roots of the controversy over creating new districts (which is discussed more extensively in the next section).

After the 1970s, the Rwenzururu movement gradually declined. In 1982, the government in Kampala was able to close a successful ceasefire with the movement under the promise of more development and autonomy for the region. The deal was signed by Charles Wesley Mumbere, son of Isaya Mukirania (hence a Mukonzo). When Mukirania died in 1966, his son took over his role. Following the ceasefire and despite the official termination of the hostilities armed groups kept proliferating in the Rwenzori region, due to several factors: the absence of a proper demobilization programme, the weak governance of both Uganda and DRC in their border areas, and decades of proxy wars between Congo, Uganda, and Sudan (Prunier 2004). Former Rwenzururu movement combatants and their descendants constituted a relevant recruitment pool for these armed groups.

The ethnicization of politics in the Rwenzori: cultural institutions and districts

The ethnicization of politics is one of the factors that led to the emergence of violence in 2014 and in 2016, as well as one of the persisting problems of the Rwenzori region. It developed in two intertwined areas: the recognition of cultural institutions and the debate over the creation of new districts (Reuss and Titeca 2016). In both these arenas, interests and choices of leaders, local and national, interacted generating a situation conducive to violent friction.

As mentioned already, traditional kingdoms were abolished in Uganda in 1967. However, in the aftermath of the 1980–1986 Ugandan civil war, the victorious Museveni-led National Resistance Movement (NRM) took power, and to mark a difference with previous rulers, it allowed the reintroduction of cultural institutions and cultural leaders. This meant the return into existence of traditional kings and kingdoms (such as the Batoro’s), but – at least on paper – devoid of any real power, their only recognized official purpose to protect cultural heritage. The 1995 constitution, the first to come into force under NRM rule, incorporated this choice, although in practice the kingdoms’ unbanning had been effective for some years already. The same constitution also set a two-term limit for the president and configured Uganda as a no-party system. This changed in 2005 when the constitution was amended, introducing multiparty competition – a change welcomed as a positive turn toward a more mature democracy – while removing limits to presidential terms. These reforms, however, also created incentives favouring the use of identity politics for electoral bargaining and as a source of patronage.

In Uganda’s history, there was no officially recognized Rwenzururu Kingdom. Yet during the years of the Rwenzururu movement, both Mukirania first and Mumbere later self-fashioned themselves as kings of the Rewenzori. The return of a Batoro Kingdom in 1994 contributed to launch a demand for the official recognition of a Rwenzori Kingdom. Kabann Kabanukye, a lecturer at the University of Makerere, claimed that 85% of the Bakonzo and Baamba were in favour of the creation of a Rwenzururu Kingdom (Doornbos, Syahuka–Muhindo and Titeca 2018: 195–196), a notion that was used to leverage in favour of creating such an institution. On the national level, while the NRM and Museveni opened up a dialogue with those supporting the creation of a Rwenzururu Kingdom, they mostly remained lukewarm to the prospect (Doornbos et al. 2018: 198–200). However, during the political campaign leading to the general

elections of 2006 (the first multiparty ones after 1986), the major opponent to Museveni, Kizza Besigye (leader of the Forum for Democratic Change [FDC]), promised the recognition of the Rwenzururu Kingdom (Turibamwe 2010). The ballots decisively swung in favour of the FDC in Kasese. The NRM, however, won the elections at the national level and decided to recognize the Rwenzururu Kingdom. The decision became official in 2009, with the coronation of Charles Mumbere as King of the Rwenzori. Naturally, the FDC's victory in Kasese may have not been due exclusively to the promise of recognition for the Rwenzururu Kingdom, yet it is worth noticing that in the following elections of 2011, the result in Kasese turned in favour of the NRM (Daily Monitor 2011; Kahungu 2011).

The recognition of the Rwenzururu Kingdom was no uncontroversial matter, and the introduction of this particular cultural institution had two critical effects. First, it set an example: cultural institutions can be labelled as “kingdoms” even when a precedent history of kingship is absent or disputed. Second, it made wary groups that did not want to be subject to an authority perceived as partisan to Bakonzo and related to a history of insurgency against Kampala. It is relevant to notice that this wariness was not exclusive to Baamba but was also present among some Bakonzo. Both the abovementioned factors led to a proliferation of demands for the recognition of cultural institutions labelled as “kingdoms” in the Rwenzori. The Basongora, a small pastoralist community present in the same region, crowned their own king in 2012, albeit unofficially, quickly followed by another minority, the Banyabindi. These developments were not welcomed by Mumbere, who released a statement claiming that “we cannot have a kingdom within a kingdom” and that the Rwenzori King “does not recognize the so-called king of the Basongora” (Misairi and Basiime 2012).

The main line of friction, however, was soon to be the one between the Bakonzo and Baamba, especially in Bundibugyo where both communities are present in fairly close numbers. In 2012, Mumbere built a shrine on a patch of land owned by his father in the village of Kirindi. This sparked clashes with the Baamba that left hundreds of people displaced for weeks (Basiime 2015; Mutegeki 2015). When Charles Mumbere asked to parade in Bundibugyo in June 2013, the permission was denied by national authorities on the grounds of the risk of violent confrontations (Basiime and Katusabe 2013). This generated resentment among the Bakonzo that felt loyal to the Rwenzururu King. But what the staunchest loyalists took as the ultimate offence was the official recognition of a Baamba Kingdom in May 2014, with Martin Kamya Ayongi crowned as king. Ayongi is the son of Yeremiya Kawamara, one of the Baamba founders of the Rwenzururu movement. In sum, while cultural institutions could not make any official claims on territory or population, each one implicitly assumed to be ruling over a specific area or people, and this has been a significant source of friction.

Besides progressive hardening of ethnic identities, another relevant effect of the recognition of the Rwenzururu Kingdom was the reignition of secessionist dreams among those who assumed that the resurrection of the Kingdom also meant the re-initiation of the struggle against Kampala. The more radical supporters of the Kingdom did not just want to secede from Uganda but also desired to annex a portion of the Congo into a new political entity known as the Yira state. Beyond the border dividing Uganda from the Congo resides a people known as Banande, very closely related to the Bakonzo. Their customs are similar, and the two groups often gather together on both sides of the border. Collectively, they form a single community self-defined as Bayira. The struggle of extremist Rwenzururu supporters is thus a fight for independence from Kampala and Kinshasa, to create a completely new nation state. The hardening of ethnic identities and the reignition of secessionist dreams both contributed to generate the attacks of July 2014: the OBR-affiliated youth wanted to fight the government and to punish the Baamba

for their “treason” at the same time. While it is uncertain if Mumbere had a direct relation with the attacks (he was not officially charged at the time), he is at least to a degree responsible as he never distanced himself publicly from the idea of an independent state, for fear of losing support.

The redefinition of ethnic identities generated by the renewal of cultural institutions intertwined with the second central arena where the region’s politics was progressively more ethnized: the dispute over the creation of new districts.

Districts are the largest sub-state administrative entities in Uganda. On a national level, district creation has functioned as a source of patronage, a process which has been increased by the introduction of multiparty competition (Green 2010). As already mentioned, the Bundibugyo district had the potential for friction due to its heterogeneity mixed with an ethnic notion of access to public offices (and to jobs more generally). The tension further worsened when the idea of creating a new district out of Bundibugyo was brought to the table.

In 2011, Christopher Kibazanga, brother of Charles Mumbere, campaigned for the seat of district chairman in Kasese from the ranks of the FDC, but he lost (Kahungu 2011). In advance of the 2016 ballot, Kibazanga moved to Bundibugyo. He turned his loyalty in favour of the NRM, being elected as MP and becoming the flag-bearer for creating a new district out of Bughendera county, a Bakonzo-dominated area within the Bundibugyo district. Of course, this project was perceived as contentious not just because of its content but also due to its proponent. To date, Bughendera is still not an autonomous district, even though Museveni promised this during his 2016 electoral campaign (The Observer 2016). It is worth mentioning that while the fieldwork was in progress, a house owned by Kibazanga was destroyed by unknown assailants. Interestingly, the house was located on the same patch of land where his brother, Charles Mumbere, had built the controversial shrine in 2012 (Basiime 2015; Mutegeki 2015).

Rehabilitation and not reconciliation: the failure of conflict transformation

The lack of a successful conflict transformation in the aftermath of the July 2014 attacks can be traced to two concurring elements. First, the government-run rehabilitation process was entirely top-down, securitized, and too limited in its scope, as it was addressed exclusively those who took part in the attacks. Second, there was no comprehensive attempt at reconciliation trying to address the root causes of conflict, reorient the fraction of local society that was willing to resort to violence away from it, empower non-violent agents, and create strong points of contact between communities. Some grassroots initiatives took place, but these remained limited in scale and impact.

In the aftermaths of the attacks, the government launched its own investigation. Since in advance of the 2014 attacks, traditional medicine used to protect from gunfire was performed on the youth, they were officially considered “misled” by a faulty leadership that intoxicated them both physically and symbolically. Consequently, the youth were offered amnesty, under the condition of voluntary surrender and participation in a short cycle of lectures (Asiimwe and Nzinjah 2014; New Vision 2014c). Christopher Kibazanga, the Rwenzori King’s brother, personally launched an appeal to those who took part in the attacks to surrender and to join the programme. From the government’s side, there was the intention to court-martial people higher in the chain of command, but the amnesty was extended to them as well, apparently due to the lack of evidence (Human Rights Watch [HRW] 2014; Kigambo 2014).

About 500 persons joined the programme and were gathered at the National Union of Youth Organization (NUYO) camp in Kasese district. In August 2014, they were all granted presidential amnesty and then attended the planned lectures in the following month (Bakonzo Youth at NUYO Amnesty Camp–Kasese 2014). However, the programme had several significant flaws that impacted its effectiveness. First, the process was heavily securitized and followed an ad hoc procedure not compliant with Ugandan law. Due to this, it was impossible for local civil society to connect with the process, a grievance repeatedly voiced by local civil society leaders during the fieldwork (Asiimwe and Nzinjah 2014; HRW 2014). Second, according to local sources, the cycle of lectures basically consisted in pro-NRM propaganda and hence was not expressly tailored to address the roots of violence, but rather to create political support for the incumbent party. Third, the decision to apply a blanket amnesty left issues of responsibility mostly unaddressed, and it is even improper to speak of an amnesty, as there are no officially determined guilty parties. Finally, the lack of a proper investigation also maintained a persisting uncertainty surrounding the mass graves found after the 2014 attacks, an issue that repeatedly fuelled tension between communities, and that was only partially addressed through spontaneous community meetings.

The resurgence of violence in 2016 is evidence of the government-led programme's ineffectiveness, and it was possible to reach such a conclusion even before the events of 2016. While still in the NUYO camp, the Bakonzo youth sent a letter to state their grievances to the president of Uganda, dated 28 July 2014. Most of the problems were framed in ethnic terms, as issues between the Bakonzo and other groups and between the Rwenzururu Kingdom and other cultural institutions. The solutions suggested in the letter were highly controversial, as they would have likely further entrenched ethnic identities and fuelled more violence. Among these, there were demands for an independent Bughendera district, for enhanced autonomy for Bakonzo living in the Ntoroko district (which had been already carved out of the Bundibugyo district), and for a revision of land distribution between Bakonzo and Basongora.

Comments on the rehabilitation programme coming from civil society representatives were critical of the process and its outcomes. Some preferred to call it a 'retraining' programme, as it was perceived to be designed to create support for the government and the NRM rather than to achieve anything else. Disarmament was naturally a part of it but not demobilization or reconciliation. According to local sources, this is a historical issue in the region, which accounts for the reproduction of armed groups and repeated violence cycles. There is also the persistence of a culture of violence, as children of (actual or former) combatants may grow up with the myths and feats of their relatives and a mythologized perception about armed struggle. In Kasese, there were also voices believing the programme was a success, but interviews with amnestied youth and with both ringleaders rather validated the pessimistic view. Their stance was not much different from the one contained in the 28 July letter, even if the process of rehabilitation had been concluded more than one year before the interviews. A definite sense of anger and frustration was perceivable during the interviews with the members of the Rwenzori youth, further enhanced by the fact that Kibazanga's house had been destroyed just the night before, while the ringleaders did not express any particular regret about past events.

The role of Christopher Kibazanga also requires careful consideration. Following the 2014 attacks, he made pleas for peace and proposed himself as a peacemaker for the region. Indeed, as Mumbere's brother he had authority over Rwenzururu Kingdom loyalists, and this is undeniably an element that was used for good when calling on those involved in the July 2014 attacks to give up arms. But the perceptions of his trustworthiness and his motives were significantly different in different communities. In Kasese, these were quite positive, and he has almost unanimously defined as one of the architects of peace in the aftermaths of July 2014. In Bundibugyo, however,

his perception was definitely more charged and not unanimously positive. Young Bakonzo saw him as a notable person who, with the attacks at his property, suffered insult because of who he was and due to the cause of peace he was struggling for, while Baamba generally did not trust him. The Baamba's lack of trust was not based on Kibazanga kinship to Mumbere or his ethnic background, but rather on the fact that he switched party affiliation (from FDC to NRM) at a very convenient time. In any case, and besides Kibazanga's personal motives, it should be apparent that he could not be perceived as impartial by both groups. Hence, while he may have been the right person to persuade Rwenzururu loyalists to lay off arms, he was not suited for the role of mediator. Furthermore, Kibazanga's campaigning for the creation of the Bughendera district made impossible to exclude him having a vested interest in creating a peculiar reputation for himself among NRM ranks as the go-to person to fix issues in the Rwenzori region, in order to further his political goal (and his own political agenda). This disqualified him in the eyes of the Baamba.

In the aftermath of the 2014 attacks, both cultural leaders – Mumbere and Ayongi – met several times, a practice that was sometimes facilitated by a broad range of actors, from the national government to churches. In late 2014, the Bamba King also met with the Bakonzo community resident in Bundibugyo (Inter-Religious Council of Uganda [IRCU] 2016; Muhindo 2014). Opinions on this practice varied. In Kasese, it was generally perceived positively and a good way for the kings to advocate for peace and show a willingness to cooperate in matters of mutual interest. In Bundibugyo, there was no criticism about the meetings between Ayongi and the Bakonzo, but Mumbere's degree of trustworthiness was questioned, as well as his real commitment behind his words. Yet the meeting of cultural leaders was not criticized per se. After the violence of early 2016, the two kings wanted to launch a message of peace again and signed a memorandum of understanding (IRCU 2016). While it is hard to determine the relative impact of this specific development, it is undeniable that later incidents mostly settled along the Bakonzo–government rift rather than the Bakonzo–Baamba one.

Representatives of civil society organizations had their own ideas about what needed to be done to broaden and deepen the rehabilitation process and transform it into a proper conflict transformation path. Among the locally launched initiatives, there were community dialogues meant to help communities hear about one another's grievances and work a way out of conflict. The format was similar in both the Kasese and the Bundibugyo districts, and a good summary of one of these dialogues is provided by Tuhaise (2014). There were also initiatives meant to reassess history and to highlight cases of cooperation between Bakonzo and Baamba rather than conflict, not just in the frame of the “big” collective history of the Rwenzururu movement, but rather in the “small” everyday stories of ordinary people from both groups, working together for common goals. The relative diffusion of inter-ethnic marriages provided a viable ground for this approach. What likely hampered the impact of these activities were scarce resources and increasing ethnic polarization. During the fieldwork, a minority clan leader working on a local radio station mentioned his repeated attempts at using his authority to deescalate and defuse the tense situation. Yet he received repeated threats from his own community, who labelled him as “Mukonzo” due to his political stances. Threats against him became worse in 2016, but luckily he remained unhurt.

Conclusions: the role of leadership and the future of the Rwenzori

The year 2016 saw violence return in the Rwenzori, with both communal clashes and new fights between Rwenzururu Kingdom loyalists and national security forces. These events point to an ineffective process of conflict transformation in the aftermath of the July 2014 attacks,

which can be connected to issues of leadership. At the macro level, the problem situates in political leaders' decisions (mostly government and partly opposition) to gain electoral consensus by recognizing potentially divisive cultural institutions and by creating (or promising to create) districts defined along ethnic lines. At the meso level, a local political leader with national ambitions, Christopher Kibazanga, legitimately decided to invest in a specific constituency (the Bakonzo in Bughendera county). Yet his proposition to create a new district further sustained the ethnicization of politics. Moreover, when his political agenda is seen in conjunction with his Mukonzo background and his kinship to Mumbere, it made him an untrustworthy peace-maker and an ineffective mediator between the government and local communities. His brother, Charles Mumbere, as a leader of a cultural institution, has been repeatedly ambiguous in his messages, not showing much appreciation for leaders of other local cultural institutions and not explicitly distancing himself from the notion of the Yira state (although his positions have changed after his arrest). While the intentions of both Kibazanga and Mumbere remain their personal matter, the messages from their actions have increased confusion, friction, and mistrust between communities.

At the micro level, ringleaders of the July 2014 attacks maintained their original positions even after the rehabilitation programme concluded. The renewed presence of witchdoctor rituals in the violent events of early 2016 is evidence of a renewal of the same dynamics seen in action in 2014. Meantime, civil society leaders found difficult to tap into the conflict transformation process due to how the matter was handled by the government, which securitized and politicized the process. This was not enough to discourage civil society leaders, which launched several initiatives meant to pursue a more durable peace (with community meetings being the most notable example), but it limited their effectiveness. The events of 2016 may have made civil society-launched initiative as substantially irrelevant, yet returning violence could have been worse in their absence.

The structural factors that led to violence in 2014 and 2016 are unfortunately still present in the Rwenzori. Ethnic criteria still define rifts between communities, grievances between staunch supporters of cultural institutions and the government have not been addressed, and the very fact that Charles Mumbere has not been tried yet could reinforce the perception among some of his followers that the state is wronging the Bakonzo one more time. The debate over the possible promotion of Bughendera county to district status is ongoing, and it is an open line of friction between the Bakonzo and Baamba in Bundibugyo.

Unemployment and underdevelopment remain rampant, while state governance is relatively weak, especially on the Congolese side. The porosity of the border allows instability to move from one side to the other easily, a transfer facilitated by the Bakonzo–Banande relationships and by persisting mistrust among the states of the region (DRC, Uganda, Sudan, and South Sudan). While further incidents have not happened since late 2016, people of the Rwenzori only have negative peace for the time being, and a more consistent and inclusive approach is required to create a positive turn.

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