NJAS
NORDIC JOURNAL OF
AFRICAN STUDIES

Gender Time, Gendered Time: In Parts of Africa

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Abstract
Over the long term, Africans socially constructed time and gender through struggle and invention, the stuff of history. But to get at this broad salience we must toggle between scales of region and period, among different kinds of evidence, and among themes such as agriculture, statecraft, and political economy. The story of time and gender told here moves from a distant past into the present, with a focus on the people of an East African inland sea commonly referred to as 'Lake Victoria'. It takes up African language vocabulary, then oral texts, then social practice. The ideas, aspirations, and struggles of Africans drive each step in the journey. They limit the effects of Global North academic ideas about gender and time in Africa's past and present, revealing new facets of both categories.

David Schoenbrun has granted NJAS permission to print a revised version of his keynote lecture, given at the International Workshop on "Rethinking Time and Gender in African History" (Ghent University, March 24–25, 2022), as part of this special issue of NJAS. This contribution has not been peer-reviewed.

Keywords: time; gender; Bantu languages; oral textuality; sex

DOI: 10.53228/njas.v32i3.1084

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About the author

David Schoenbrun draws on archaeology, linguistics, historical ecology, and documents to reconstruct the African past in East Africa's Great Lakes region. Schoenbrun's research draws extensively on the comparative study of African languages and African oral traditions. By comparing words and meanings across related African languages, he has traced both changes and continuities in communicative practices – learning, meaning-making, and innovation. This approach foregrounds African interests in and struggles over making sense of their world and imparting value to it. In his latest book, *The Names of the Python*, Schoenbrun (2021) argues that systems of belonging, including ethnicity, are not static, automatic, or free of contest. Rather, historical contexts shape the ways in which we are included in or excluded from specific identifications. This history of groupwork shows Africans refusing the blinding certainties of ethnic thought, in no small part because they have paid special attention to those at the margins, who keep alternative groupwork alive.

Introduction

Africans conceptualized and marked time and gender by socially constructing both. They made time and gender central to struggle and invention, the stuff of history. But to get at this broad salience we must toggle between scales of region and period, among different kinds of evidence, and among themes such as agriculture, statecraft, and political economy. My story of time and gender moves from a distant past into the present, I will focus on the people of an East African inland sea commonly referred to as 'Lake Victoria'. I will focus on African language vocabulary, then oral texts, then social practice. The ideas, aspirations, and struggles of Africans drive each step in the journey. They limit the effects of Global North academic ideas about gender and time in Africa's past and present, revealing new facets of both categories.

I will explore time and gender as a social-historical relationship in three ways. First, I make claims about the meanings of time and gender that speakers of Bantu languages were able to express from the last millennium BCE into the recent past. All the speakers whose expressions constitute the evidence at hand lived in the last century and a half. But they arguably worked with concepts of time and gender which had deeper roots and longer histories. Conceptual resources related to time and gender are old, durable, and flexible precisely because people found them useful in living their lives.

Secondly, vernacular chronologies of historical time and their gendering have political backgrounds. Vernacular chronologies order time by stating what matters about the past in the present of a performance and its interpretation. Often, but by no means exclusively, genealogy provides chronological structure in oral texts like epics or historical tales. But such oral texts routinely sample other genres to create time palimpsests or mosaics. The effect of sampling is like the effect of a text. The attention and interpretation people pay to sampled messages lift the performance out of the moment of its creation.

The third nexus concerns the intersections of lunar time and fertility at an island shrine on the inland sea most of you know as Lake Victoria. Women and men bereft in some way, often bereft of living children, followed lunar rhythms to assemble in large numbers at this shrine. They had sex, ate, refurbished the shrine, shared information, and made requests of the shrine's spirits. In a context of well-fed conviviality, they tried to take advantage of causality, using the sighting of a new moon as a sign that female fertility was most likely. Their assembly bound lunar time with distinct gendered inputs to procreation.

I hope that scholars of the contemporary will find something of value in remarks that focus on Africa before the 20th century. I assume all of you think critically about time and gender concepts rooted in Global Northern histories. By doing so, we and our colleagues reveal other routes to African histories of these topics.

Some scholars study gender and sexuality in Africa over long spans of time (Sacks 1982; Ogbomo 1997; Saidi 2010; Fourshey et al. 2017; Mbah 2019; Ogundiran 2020; Jimenez 2020; Katto 2023). Their scholarship responds in part to venerable, progressive threads in African women's history (Berger and White 1999; Hodgson and McCurdy 2001; Allman et al. 2002; Sheldon 2017). By sidelining Euro-American gender concepts, these scholars find that shifting gender complementarity, over the course of a life, explains more of the history of gender and sexuality than gender binarism or hierarchy explains. Together with African women's historiography, they locate patriarchy in specific historical contexts – often, but not only, colonial ones – and qualify it with histories of biologically female power in gendered and aged social categories (Hodgson and McCurdy 2001; Allman et al. 2002).

Another important move refuses stable gendered categories themselves, and not only their political interrelations. From Ifi Amadiume's foundational statements on gender fluidity and blending, many historians distinguish biological from social motherhoods, especially in contexts of African or colonial statecraft (Amadiume 1987; Achebe 2011; Semley 2011 Stephens 2013). Sylvia Nannyonga-Tamusuza (2009) shows intellectuals working closely with the Buganda state to craft a spatial practice of gender hierarchy. The intellectuals claimed that wherever royal or noble persons went, that space became socially masculinized (Musisi 1991; Stephens 2013). In other words, the mere presence of royals or nobles rendered everyone of commoner or slave status socially feminine, regardless of their biosex. The state spatialized gender in Buganda.

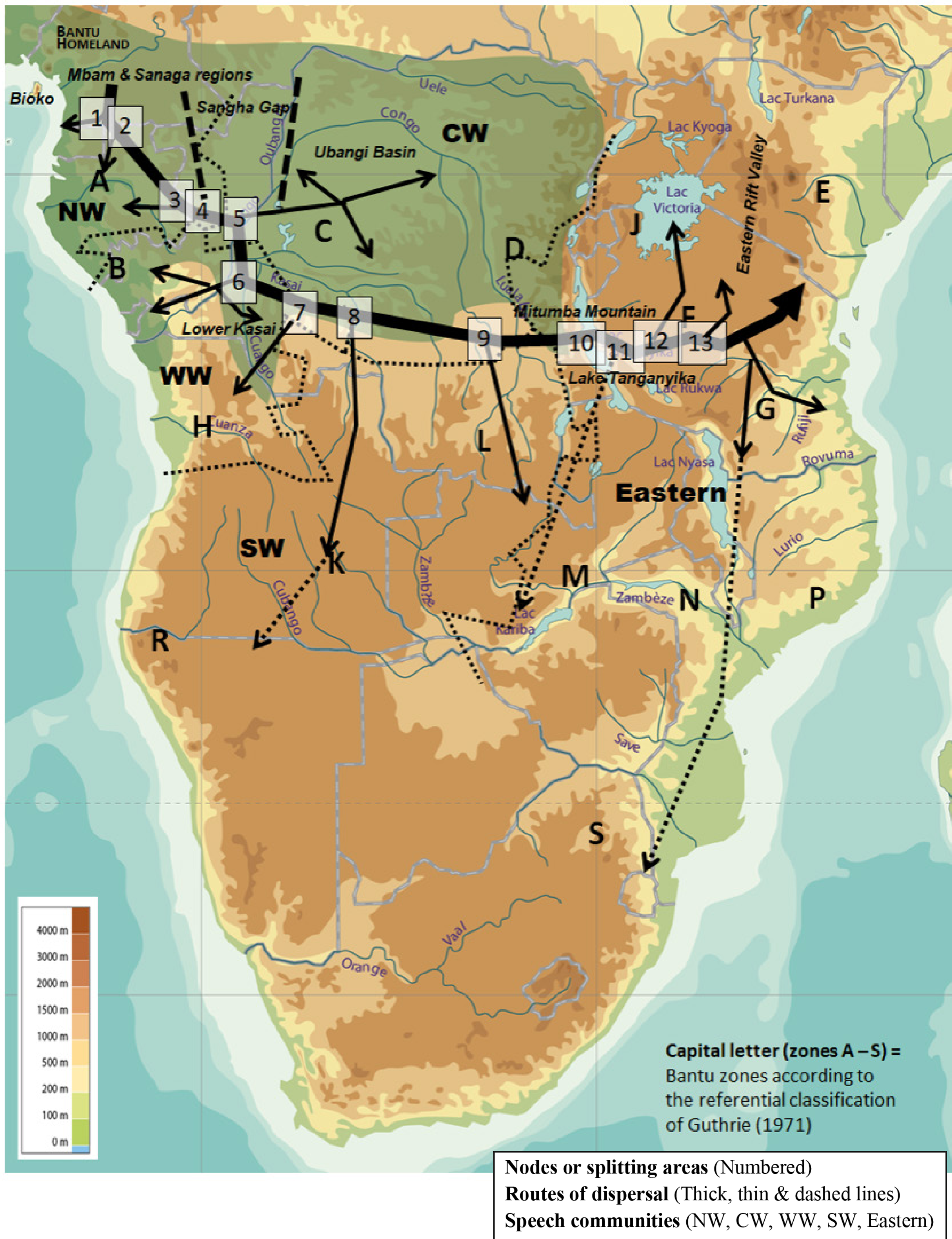
Perhaps the clearest rejection of the gender described in colonial settings is Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyewùmí's refusal of gender as a useful category of analysis (Oyewùmí 1997). Oyewùmí argued that seniority and lineage explain more and obscure less about political culture in the part of Africa known as 'Yorùbáland'. Fresh approaches to gender dynamics – like those of Signe Arnfred, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, and Nkiru Nzegwu – highlight contemporary ideas and practices of sexual agency and power, pushing gender complementarity paradigms beyond binaries and into subjective psychosocial histories of the present (Nzegwu 2011; Bakare-Yusuf 2013; Arnfred 2015). Many of you have developed these very ideas. And I look forward to learning more from your work with gender and time in Africa.

This work informs the essay's three core issues. First, to rethink imperial, colonial, and post-colonial relations between time and gender, we might turn to the conceptual resources Africans used to think about, debate, change, or conserve their interrelationships. Yet histories of time and gender must include the play of struggle and contingency shaping the story. Oral textual records of thought, debate, change, or continuity in time and gender relations reveal the interplay of interest and context shaping them. Struggle and contingency involve practice. So, what did Africans do to blend time and gender in specific contexts?

Conceptual histories of 'time' and 'gender' with African languages

Language points the way. Most scholars who wish to historicize words and meanings turn to written examples. But historians of language in times and places beyond writing must be creative. They use a method of comparison called 'Words, Things, and Meaning' (Nurse 1997; Ehret 2011; Fleisch and Stephens 2016; Schoenbrun 2019a, 2019b). The method holds that if a word signifying something – let us say 'iron ore' – may be reconstructed for an earlier form of a language – let us say 'Proto-Eastern Bantu' – then whenever and wherever people spoke Proto- Eastern Bantu, they knew something about ironworking (Ehret 2001; Vansina 2006; Stephens and Fleisch 2016, 1–20). Scholars study the regular correspondence between the sounds in words from different languages with the same meanings to reconstruct earlier forms. You find variability among corresponding sounds and propose the earlier forms which gave those used today (Nurse 1997, 361–363). Then you map the distributions of meanings onto the geography of the languages represented in historical language classifications to create a sequence of nodes. If the distributions stay within the languages comprising a node or speech community, then when and where that speech community existed is when and where a given word and meaning existed.

The method only allows provisional propositions about ancient meanings, for several reasons. First, one can rarely reconstruct a context of use for a given word and so construe with some precision the meaning people made with the word in that context.



Map 1. Expansions of the Bantu languages. Map by Rebecca Grollemund; see Grollemund et al. (forthcoming).

Mostly, historical linguists construe past meanings by logical inferences about 'core' fields of meaning, divorced from actual past speakers and speaking. They get meaning from accounts of speaking written down long after the purported time in which a reconstructed word and meaning existed. The desire for intellectual and political histories of people beyond literacy forces us to accept the provisional qualities of narratives based on such evidence (Vansina 1990; Ehret 1998; Kirch and Green 2001; Heggarty 2007; Anthony 2007; Fields-Black 2008; Hill 2008; Gonzales 2009; Ortman 2012). Here are a few such words Bantu-language speakers used to talk about time and gender.

Let's look at two verbs which signify temporality in different but overlapping ways. The oldest of the two is used today in most of the more than 500 languages descended from the speech community specialists call 'Proto Bantu'. This ancient verb may signify 'grow to maturity, become an adult'. Four or five thousand years ago, when people spoke Proto Bantu, they pronounced the verb something like '*kokóda*'. An adjective *bokódó* signifying 'adult, senior, elder, principal, big, old, or mature' and a noun *mokódó* signifying 'adult, important person, master, elder sibling, old person' are just as widespread and consistent in their signification as the verb *kokóda*. A causative form of the verb, *kokódịa*, signifies 'to cause to mature, to bring to fruition'. Innumerable rituals, great and small, involve biological men and biological women doing things – sometimes involving sex – to 'grow' an object, an enterprise, a newly titled royal person, and so forth. Their actions linked bigness and firstness and gendered work in shaping time's unfolding. This bundle of words and meanings conceptualizes time's continuities as cumulative and accretive. The causative form shows that people understood that cumulation required they intervene to help it along.

Another linguistic expression bearing on time and gender emphasizes dashing time's continuities. That is, it signifies the creation of units of time in which important cultural and biological things could happen. Those events often had gendered dimensions. Depending on which noun class prefix a speaker put on the root *-lèmbe*, she could use the noun to signify 'interval, generation, reign, peace, or the period of rest well-supported women could enjoy while menstruating'. Those nouns were made from a verb, *kulèmba*, 'be tired, be weakened', suggesting a poetics of time control in which dashing time involved modulating its pace of movement to create intervals. In one small part of the Great Lakes region, people used the noun to refer to the *Erythrina* tree. *Erythrina* trees embody time segmentation. They drop their leaves and remain leafless for some time, then bright red flowers blossom and they leaf out, before dropping their leaves again, restarting the cycle. Their shiny seeds of vermillion and black symbolize the spiral cycle connecting the redness of life and the darkness of death. They materialized ideas of time as segmented or dashed.

This concept and practice overlaps with ideas about aiding flows of time with gendered ideas of social practice and personhood, expressible with *kokóda* or *kokódịa*, as just discussed. Thus, over millennia, speakers of Bantu languages co-created and influenced time's flows for personal and collective wellbeing. Their lexicon theorized something we might call 'timework'. People found these ideas so valuable that they passed them across the generations separating Bantu language speakers in the present from people who used earlier Bantu languages. They embraced the proposition that specialists, special action, and assembly could fashion time to specific ends. They could take advantage of causality to impart maturity; they could mark time rather than simply measure it. People often set gender to that task.

Figures 1a, 1b, 1c. *Erythrina* spp. (*omulèmbe*) is a deciduous flowering tree. The vermillion seeds have a black dot where they were connected to the seed pod.[1]

[1] Image sources: Figure 1a: "Erythrina lysistemon", by Andre Abrahami, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.5. Figure 1b: "Erythrina lysistemon, Van Wouw straat", by JMK, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0. Figure 1c: "Erythrina madagascariensis - Seeds", by Ton Rulken, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

It is sometimes said that Africa's Bantu languages do not mark gender morphologically. But the statement is misleading. Before the word 'gender' got mixed up with binaries, it simply meant 'category' and Bantu languages use prefixes to mark categories, in very general terms. While none of those prefixes marks a category as biologically or sociologically female or male, marking gender in a manner that blends biology and social standing occurs in many African languages. In the vast Bantu group, those prefixes are variations on *nya-* or *na-* and *sa-* or *se-* or *ta-* or *tata-*, which refer to 'mother' or 'father', respectively. The prefixes mark gender by signifying the co-creation of successful reproduction – the motherhood and the fatherhood that results. Those statuses may be social or biological, depending on contexts of use. Thus, when people used these prefixes in a name or title, they signified the ostensive gendered standing of their referent. One gender pointed to the existence of others. In other words, it is worth naming a person or making a title for a social position using the *nya-* prefix to set it off from other names or titled social positions made with different prefixes, such as *sse-*, *ka-*, or *wa-* and so forth. The prefixes are like a quote or a citation, attracting interpretive attention. They evoke the co-creation of life and groups by different actors. But a bioman may carry a 'mothered' title and a biowoman may carry a 'fathered' title, blending the body with culture in their work.

This is hegemonic, unquestioned gender marking. It argues that keeping time flowing as a feature of health and wealth requires appropriately aged and gendered individuals – with complementary domains of experience and obligation – to co-create that flow. Yet this hegemonic understanding of continuity and change can become an ideology, a subject of debate and revision. When people interpret the actions of named individuals of a particular age and gender, in specific contexts, including in oral textual performances, they make age and gender ideologies.

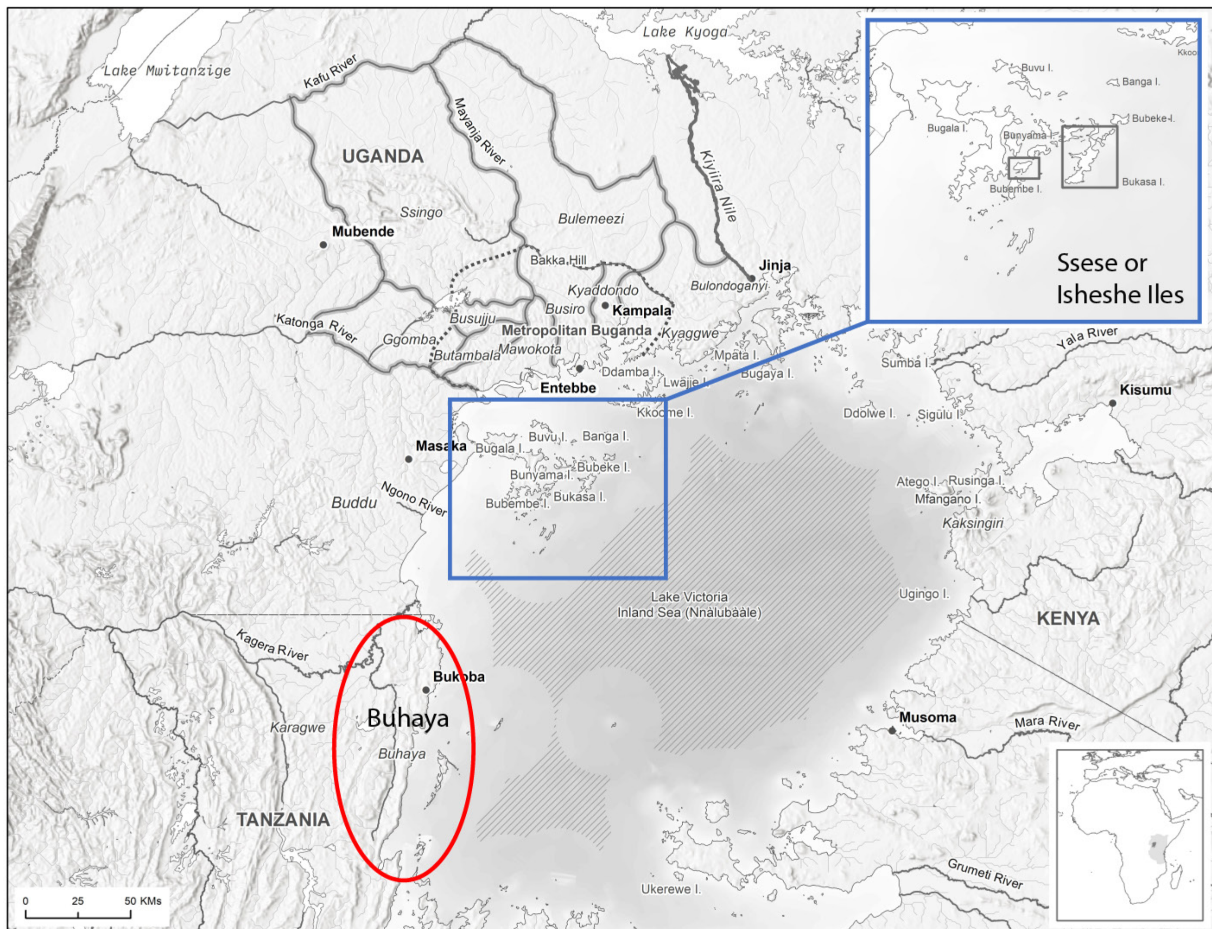
In Buhaya, a part of the Great Lakes region bordering the Inland Sea, people know a figure called the *muharambwa*. This person is a bioman who dresses as a woman by wearing the dried bast of the banana or *ensete* tree while they help with smelting iron or lead public rituals such as first-fruit ceremonial planting. The *muharambwa* also handles risky materials. They dispose of dead animals and remove burned bodies or the ash of burned bodies after deadly house fires (Beattie 1957; Kaindoa 1978, 305).[1] The *muharambwa* officiated at a village shrine oriented to Irungu, a spirit of the wild lands in which hunters, smelters, and healers find their materials (Schmidt 1997, 218; Cory and Hartnoll 1945, 114–120, 265–269).[2]

This transvested bioman plays key roles in strongly gendered domains. Biomen dominate iron smelting, gendering that process as one of procreative sex, signifying the furnace as a biowoman's fertile body and the bellows as a bioman's phallus. Biowomen dominate planting, harvesting, processing, and cooking, teasing biomen who do such work as offenders of gender complementarity. The *muharambwa* blends those domains, embodying the centrality of age-gender complementarity to agro-technical success.

But the word itself is found only in a tiny part of a region where iron smelting and agriculture have millennia-long histories. That narrow distribution suggests people created the transvested figure long after they created the social and technological processes a *muharambwa* helped conduct. The *muharambwa* figures prominently in historical tales about the advent of a famed sovereign knot in Buhaya, that of Rugomora Mahe, which I will discuss shortly. Thus, transvested biomen likely emerged with debates over centralizing politics in this part of the region, a development that historians agree was well underway in the 17th century.

[1] Senior members of an initiatory group were called 'mothers' or 'grandmothers' regardless of biosex.

[2] Irungu (Ddungu, in Luganda) helped with hunting and extracting forest resources, including those required for smelting iron.



Map 2: The Inland Sea, Buhaya, Ssese/Isheshe, and Buganda. Based on a map by Kelsey Rydland that appeared in Schoenbrun (2021).

The word-meanings I've shown you do not reveal a speaker's positionality. As parts of a vocabulary, could anyone use them in the past? It's hard to say because words do not disclose the power relations shaping how people use them in conversation or performance. How can we get at the interests that speakers advanced in a particular communicative act, using the words in question? How can we get at debate over the meaning and purpose of concepts concerning the intersections of gender and time? We must dispense with paradigms of meaning and study discourse. Oral texts are rich and abundant sources.

Vernacular chronologies: Oral textuality, time, and gender

'Oral textuality' is a communicative practice that includes speech, music, bodily motion, and objects. The 'textuality' in the phrase rejects the assumption that 'orality' differs in essential ways from graphic forms of communication, especially alphabetic literacy. Despite their obvious differences, oral and written forms of communication share a lot. Historians must not make them poles on a continuum of facticity. Moreover, where writing existed alongside oral textuality the two forms influenced one another. A firm distinction between them is of little value to historians (Cohen et al. 2001, 14–15). Both may sever

ties to the time of their creation and attract interpretive attention (Barber 2007, 3).

I just claimed that oral texts shared features with written texts. Their textuality lies in their form, in the aims of their composition, and in their involvement in social process. As Karin Barber (2007, 2, 3) explains, they were meant "to attract attention and outlast the moment", and to be "detachable from the flow of conversation". I would add that oral textual performances had to be done so that events, such as a smelt or a political installation, could accomplish their desired transformations: making metal from ore, making agreement from contests to rule, and so forth. Speech activated social processes. People spoke over medicines to release their capacities. They named children to hatch them out of a group, into their individuality (Seitel 1974; Schoenbrun 2006, 1422–1425; Schoenbrun 2021, 105–108).

So, if contexts frame the actions or social consequences that performances of oral texts instigate, are oral texts just records of a present, the present of performance? Such a conception is unnecessarily limiting because oral texts introduce elements of pastness into a performance. They do so through a technique called 'entextualization', which Karin Barber has explored with characteristic insight.

Entextualization points to an oral text's "specific textuality, its specific way of being a text", that is, "the way it is set up as a text" (Barber 2007, 13–14). If we stipulate that writing, print, speech, and performance all fabricate an order of signs to get attention and provoke interpretation, then entextualization makes a bit of discourse detachable from its local context. You write it down, you make a proverb or riddle that is easy to quote, attributing an earlier use, you freeze a piece of discourse by responding to it or interpreting it, you redeploy a piece of discourse in a new one. In these ways, people make cultural forms persist through creative and critical attention to durability. Detachability aids that work, but it relies on the stability of formal fields of discourse – genres – and on "institutional arrangements set up by" their owners, producers, and users (Barber 2007, 21–28).

The detachability of entextualization makes time mosaics. By sampling genres, a performer draws attention to packets of meaning that have a life before and outside of her performance. Marking meaning in that way, she brings the past into the present, a juxtaposition that creates multiple points of departure to hinterlands of interpretation of meaning not literally present in the performance. Likewise, the out-thereness of an oral text means it does not belong to the author-performer, but that it expresses the intentions of earlier others (Barber 2007, 10). The meanings at stake in the performance are not confined to a single moment in a line of time or to a single author working in a timeline. They have earlier salience, the salience a performer points to with her quoting and sampling. Such meanings have future lives in the debates over them undertaken by the curious and the knowledgeable. In these ways oral performances share a lot with texts.

I already asserted that one may historicize time and gender by looking for people proposing alternatives. Spirit mediums and their interpreters did something like that in the Great Lakes region when they invented a new kind of public healing called *cwezi kubandwa*. This practice argued that spirits could be brought back from Ghostland through public healing by and for a larger group. To belong in the group, people did not need to share genealogical ties of kinship or status as adults with living children. This more open practice suggested that lineage and territorial spirits alone failed to ensure collective wellbeing. It rejected a claim that lineages should be the only form of groupwork for pursuing health, wealth, and social reproduction. Their critique appears in genealogies of the figures who

created *cwezi kubandwa*. Here is a synthesized version (Johnston 1902, 594–600; Karubanga [1915] 1949, 1–5; Bikunya 1927, 8–49; Nyakatura 1947, 11–61; Fisher [1911] 1970, 84–110; Berger 1981, 127–134).

> *Nyamiyonga*, the ruler of Ghostland, desired to make a blood friendship with *Isaza*, the last Tembuzi ruler of a place called Kitara. Isaza feared a blood friendship with Nyamiyonga, a person he had not met. So, Isaza instructed a follower, *Bukuku*, to make the pact with Nyamiyonga on his behalf. Offended by this decision, Nyamiyonga sent his daughter *Nyamata* to seduce Isaza. She succeeded, returned to the land of ghosts, and gave birth to a son, *Isimbwa*. Nyamiyonga sent Isaza two cows which then led Isaza's favorite cow back to Ghostland. Isaza pursued them all into Ghostland where he met his son Isimbwa and Nyamata.
>
> Isimbwa grew up in Ghostland and had a son with a woman there. One day Isimbwa decided to visit his father's domain in the land of the living. But while they had all been in Ghostland, Isaza's gatekeeper, Bukuku, had taken Isaza's place. Diviners had told Bukuku that his daughter, *Nyinamwiru*, would bear a son who would overthrow him. The diviners told Bukuku to keep Nyinamwiru hidden in a house without doors, attended by the woman *Nyabuzana*. Isimbwa, disguised as a hunter, discovered her and she had a son by him, called *Ndahura*. Bukuku discovered the child and threw him into a river, where a potter found and saved him. Ndahura, now called *Ndahura kyarubimba rw'esakara myambi rumoma*, was the first Cwezi. Ndahura grew up, killed Bukuku, and ruled, winning military victories against existing domains in the region. One of Ndahura's children, *Wamara*, ruled after Ndahura disappeared. One of Wamara's descendants, *Ruhinda*, founded another following dynasty, called Abahinda. The figure *Mugasha* lived at the same time as Wamara, before the Abacwezi disappeared. Some say Mugasha was independent, some say Mugasha was a Cwezi.

So. The Tembuzi era ends with Isimbwa, its last son, unable to return to the land of the living. The next era, the Cwezi era, opens with Nyinamwiru bearing Ndahura, after welcoming Isimbwa to the land of the living. The message is clear: the new scale of political life involved much larger networks than Nyinamwiru's fearful father, Bukuku, could create. Key figures have praise names which say things about the change they created. *Kyomya ruganda*, a uterine brother of Ndahura's, is 'the clan or lineage-desiccator', a concise statement of the need to change clanship. *Ndahura kyarubimba rw'esakara myambi rumoma*, the first Cwezi, is 'I dominate, of effervescing thatching for myself (with) arrows spreading', suggesting, in an opaque way, that the new public healing will involve conflict and self-defense.

Praise names cite accomplishment and moral qualities. They point to hinterlands of interpretation absent from the performance itself. That absence lends the performance a textual quality. The absence dis-embeds the performance from a now moment so that audience members with different degrees of curiosity, knowledge, and standing can interpret and reflect.

The names of gendered figures and the use of gendered temporal units can also do this. Epic panegyrics about Mugasha, a figure mentioned in the Kitara Epic, are sung in Buhaya.

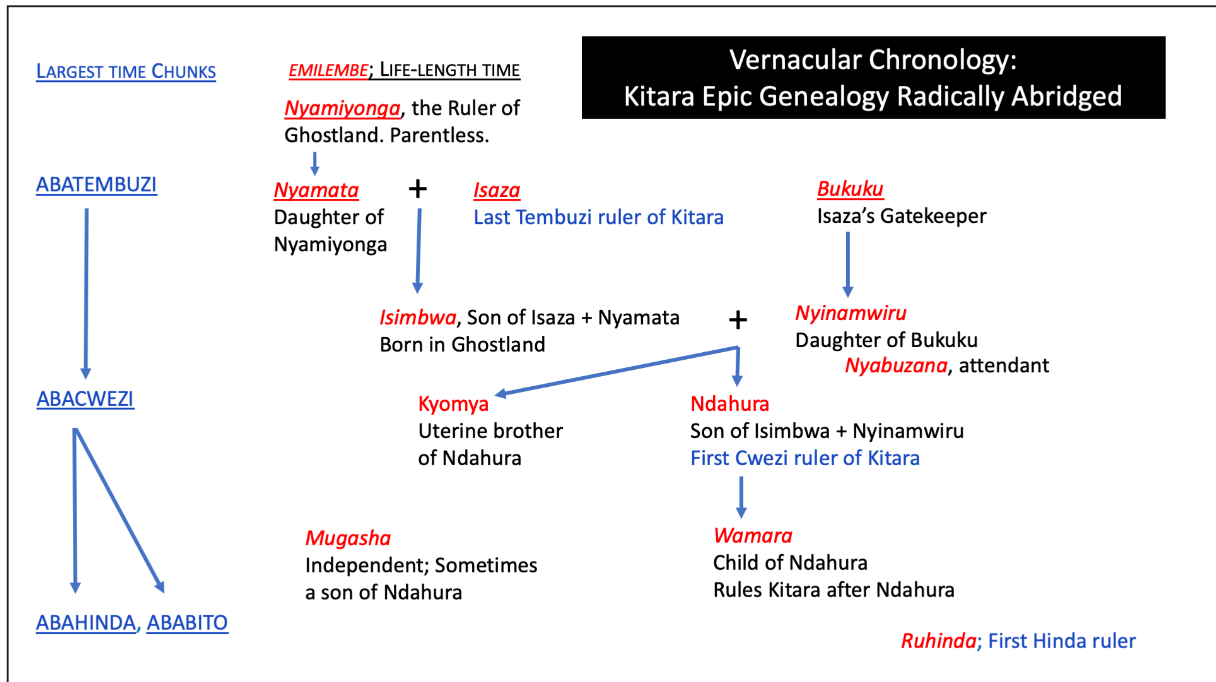


Figure 2: Vernacular chronology and the Kitara 'epic': A radically abridged genealogy.

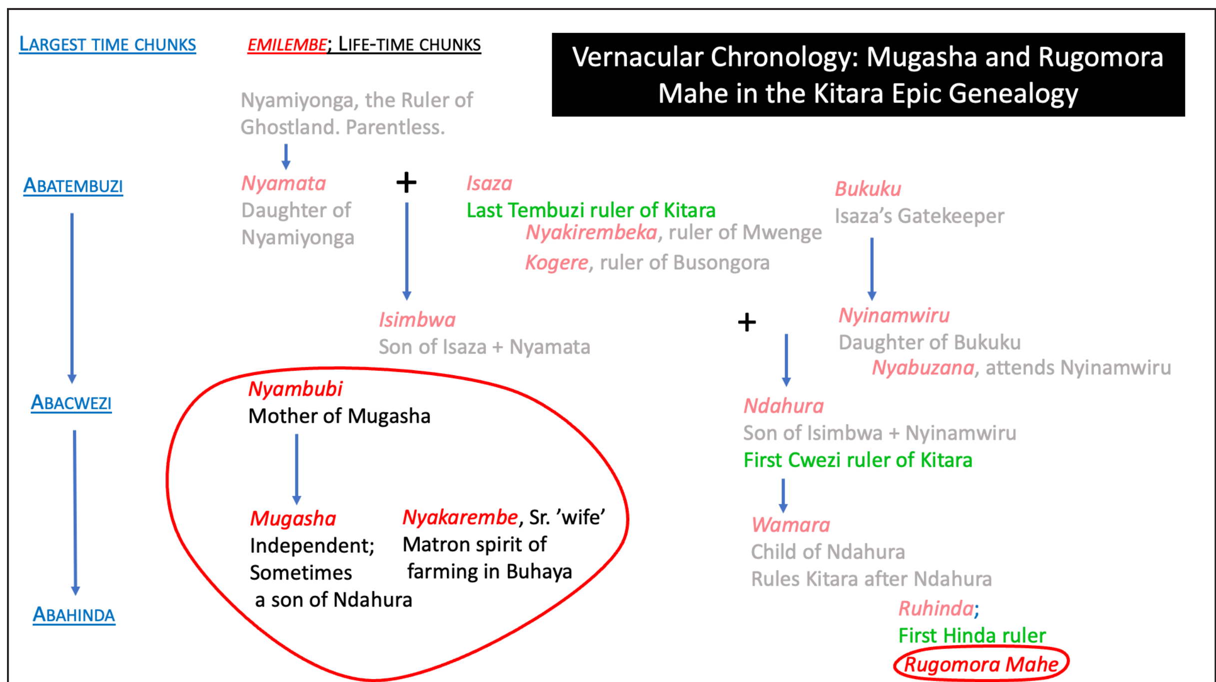


Figure 3. Vernacular chronology: Mugasha and Rugomora Mahe in 'Kitara epic' genealogy.

In the version of this epic sung by Ngurukizi Leonard in Buhaya in 1976 (Mulokozi 2002, 216–293), the song names the villages of the midwives who helped Nyambubi give birth to Mugasha. Their home villages draw a matricentric patrilocal map of the sources of Mugasha's life. In the same performance, Ngurukizi repeated a ten-day temporal unit as the unit of time related to fertility, to organizing funereal mourning, and to the length of Mugasha's travel-quests for wives and to recover his father's seized drum of rule. A single ten-day unit of time frames each activity. But first it expressed the length of time Nyambubi, a mature woman, is infertile.

Another tale from Buhaya involves Mugasha. This one accounts for the events tying Rugomora Mahe's sovereign knot with threads of travel, alliance, and 'marriage'. It tells how Nyakarembe, a 'wife' of Mugasha, was the matron spirit of agricultural knowledge in Rugomora's polity. In Augustine Kaindoa's version of the tale, told in 1969 to the archaeologist-historian Peter Schmidt, Nyakarembe taught Rugomora Mahe how to create a *muharambwa* to work with women farmers to make their agricultural skill bear fruit. With this gift of knowledge, Nyakarembe wove an independent thread of power into Rugomora Mahe's polity (Kaindoa 1978, 305). The thread was spatial and gendered. It authorized a royal's use of gender-blended transvesting by rooting it in Mugasha's shrine on the Inland Sea.

So, people combined time and gender to make sense of their world, putting the past up for discussion to make a better future. Epic panegyric historical tales and spirit possession crash into the present, making oral textuality a gendered form of time-control for affective-political ends. Let's spend a little more time at Mugasha's principal shrine on Bubembe Island, in the Inland Sea's Ssese or Isheshse Archipelago, to get the flavor of how blending time and gender worked.

Sex time: Bubembe and new moons

Thinking about time and gender touched on politics, power, knowledge, and assembly. The gender people made with timework was participatory, fricative, and moral. It reveals a lot about power. But gender not only mirrors the intersections of time and power. Gender makes time. Struggles over the social and biological aspects of reproduction express this clearly. Claims about Mugasha's gender and the choreography of assembly at the shrine reveal groups constituting themselves through varieties of gender, not just one form.

Mugasha represented many things, as befits a figure with so wide a range of followers and officials. Mugasha was male, female, or both (Felkin 1885/1886, 762).[3] Mugasha was the medium Nakangu, a senior biowoman of the Lungfish clan. Mugasha was a meteor-hammer. Mugasha was the Inland Sea. Mugasha was a shifting, composite being, shaped by need and setting. Before Mugasha's medium was female, a bioman played the part (Roscoe 1911, 297). As a meteor-hammer, Mugasha emitted a masculine aura of metallurgical labour and sexual mechanics (Heald 1995, 497–500; Schmidt 1997, 215–223). As a metonym of the Inland Sea, Mugasha embodied the femaleness of water-as-amniotic fluid. Mugasha received the projections of people at different stages of gendered life.

The choreography of assemblies at Bubembe deepened gendered aspiration. In one drama, a rivulet of blood from a sacrificed cow ran down a gutter made from the ribs of banana leaves and into the Inland Sea. When the flow reached the waters, the onlookers called out: "S/he has drunk it." Widely in this region, cattle joined the wealth transferred from a man's lineage to a woman's lineage in marriage negotiations.

[3] Pilkington (1899, 73) glossed Mukasa as "a kind of female Neptune" and recorded a plural form as well, *bamukasa*. Gorju (1920, 168) gives "madame Neptune".

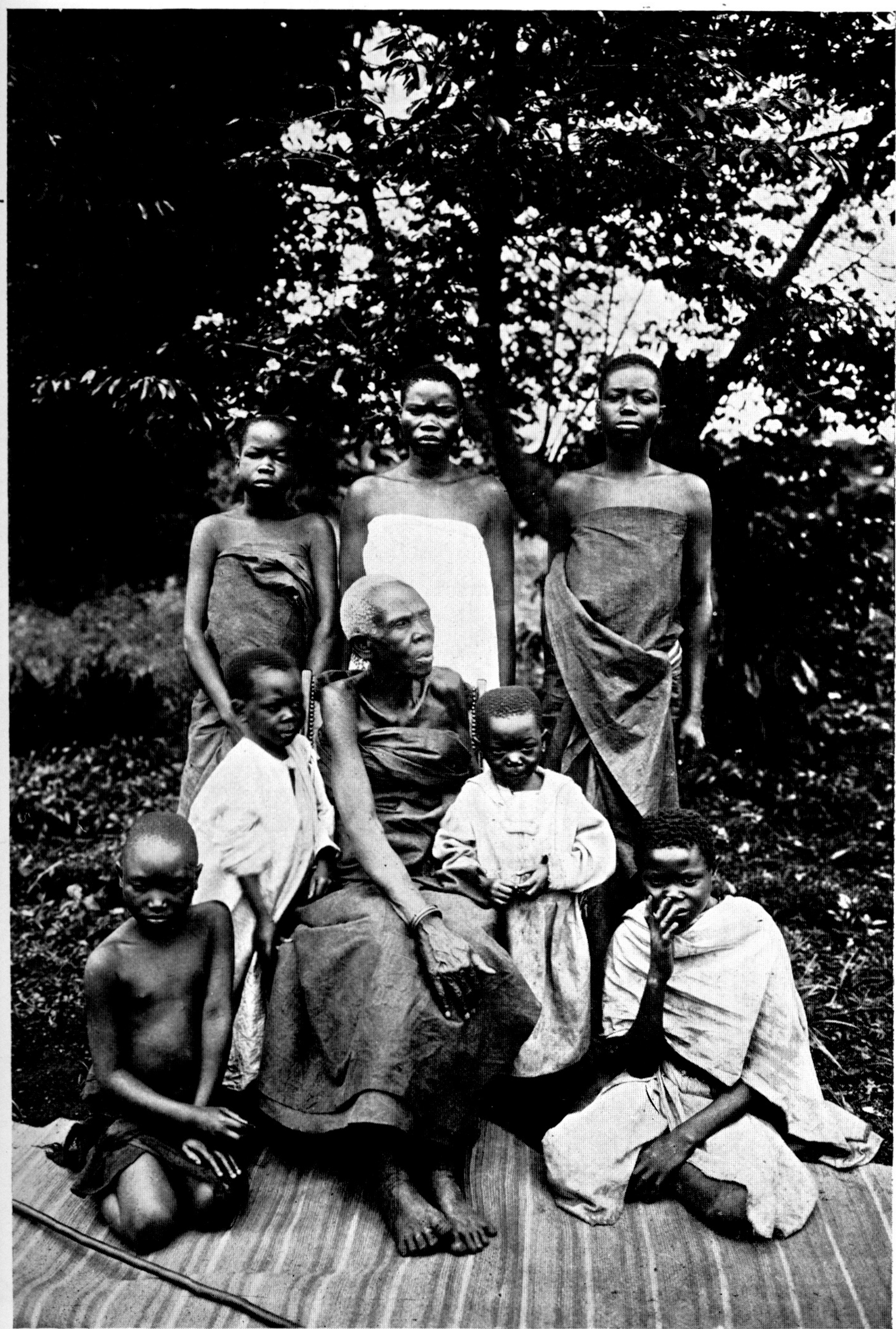


Figure 4. “The Goddess Mukasa and Her Court”, by John C. Cunningham. Image first published in Cunningham (1905, 75). In the public domain.

At Mugasha's shrine, biomen manipulated the blood rivulet to emphasize its flow and capture, mapping abstract qualities of descent. Using cupped hands to accept something, or catching liquid in a vessel, is described in Luganda as *kùlembeka*. In Luganda, this form may have been derived from *kulèmba*, a verb no longer in use but from which people also made words for dashing time into units to manage social reproduction. Another transitive form, *kùlembekera*, describes offering something to a spirit (Le Veux 1917, 527).[4] As the Inland Sea, Mugasha consumed blood that had crossed from the land of the living into a woman's watery womb, invoking descent and belonging.

This scene reenacted a central understanding of how to grow children. The key was the timely mixing of male and female fluids. Many in the audience who chorused "S/he has drunk it" understood that, in that time and place, the waters of the Inland Sea were amniotic fluids (Johnston 1902, 699).[5] Fertility quests and self-mastery echoed together in their minds. Supplicants attending these festivals as part of fertility quests saw this as high drama. Their personal travails blended with something like a liturgy. The choreography of refurbishment expressed a theory of fertility as timely sex, as braided adult gender, and as the possibilities of their abundance.

These descriptions defy careful chronological exploration. They may be put only into a generic 'earlier' period, divided by the 17th century, when state actors – like Rugomora Mahe – made their presence felt in the shrine's politics. Yet the snippets reveal the intersections of timework, gender-crossing and gender-braiding. Led by shrine officials and enhanced by august visitors and ordinary supplicants, themes of sex ran through assemblies at Bubembe.

Sex blended pleasure, fertility, and moral belonging with the beneficial ends of life. Sex alone could not ensure its great powers would make a better future. An adult belonged morally in the group formed by the self-mastery they practised in raising children. A shrine official, Semagumba, the 'father of barren women', judged Mugasha's acceptance of the animals offered for sacrifice. Animals who lowed or dropped dung during this moment were deemed unacceptable and Semagumba often concluded that the cause was the failure of shrine personnel to control their sexual activity. Self-mastery made offerings effective, reflecting the ambivalent core of sex's power. It was efficacious if timed correctly, dangerous if not (Roscoe 1911, 293; Heald 1995, 498, 499). Sex fostered maturation, not just conception, making biology moral.[6]

Sex echoed in Bubembe's festive life, suggesting place and timing shaped its effects. In the 1890s, the head of a canoe-using fishing group explained to the Ganda historian, ethnographer, and Prime Minister, Apolo Kagwa, the necessity of going home to one's wife to have timely sex – after a second, successful fishing expedition, but not before. Kagwa wrote: "This task is called rearing the net" (Kagwa 1918, 280, 283). In Luganda, the quote used the transitive causative verb, *kùkuzà*, which I discussed earlier. In Kagwa's usage, it states that people must help things mature; in this case, they must help a fishing net mature to be productive. Things mature naturally, but people must help them mature appropriately, a theory of agency expressed in the verb *kùkulà*.

Life at Mugasha's shrine often ran to lunar rhythms of assembly. Visible across a vast region, the phases of the moon coordinated Mugasha's assemblies with assemblies

[4] Between 1150 and 1350 CE, jars dominated Amin's Island assemblages but were absent in mainland assemblages (Amin 2015, 401).

[5] Johnson (2014, 6, 7) gives *Namayanja* or "Mother of the bodies of water", an unending pool of amniotic fluid.

[6] Dancing, too. Le Veux (1917, 360) glosses *kukiga* as "dance, as was customary at the birth of twins".

elsewhere. This reflected a practice of creating menstrual synchrony to increase the chances of pregnancy through well-timed sex. We can see this in the claims that sexual activity between shrine official couples was important in new moon celebrations and in the refurbishing festivals at Bubembe.

Around 1900, African intellectuals and European missionaries wrote about sexual activity at such gatherings in coded language. A missionary mentioned that after refurbishing Mugasha's shrine, senior officials and "all the people who had taken part in the work" could "go to their homes" (Roscoe 1911, 295). The phrasing suggests sexual activity resumed after a new moon appeared, in the week following the 20-day period of refurbishing. The same missionary mentions that Mugasha's female medium "might have as many slave-girls as she wished from those attached to the temple" (Roscoe 1911, 298). Shrine officials sheltered the young women in their care, in keeping with the argument that they represented gifts of thanks to Mugasha from grateful (and wealthy) supplicants (Roscoe 1911, 298, 300).[7] These young women, given by grandees and royals, constituted a pool of potential unions and of connections to the communities delivered from childlessness. Mugasha's female medium controlled their work, including "distributing them amongst the chiefs who were on good terms with her" (Cunningham 1905, 86; Roscoe 1911, 276).[8] This points to fertility and vulnerability, important matters to ordinary supporters of Mugasha. Even if it is dangerous under these limitations of information to say more on this topic, Mugasha's shrine clearly hosted moon-influenced sex and spoken allusion to it.

People connected lunar cycles and fertility by sanctioning sexual activity among those at the shrine.[9] Menstruation was supposed to be downtime for women. The idiom was *Wamirembe*, a term sharing a semantic field with the reigns of royals (Kagwa 1918, 181; Snoxall 1967, 205, 300). Lunar phases were named with other terms. Lunar waxing and waning conditioned far more kinds of activity than those entailed by the rhythms of a mature, healthy female body. The idea of an interval drew these fields together.

Mugasha's shrine hosted events designed to deliver fertility (Gorju 1920, 222). The timing of the events drew on female experience of menstrual cycles in terms of the growth and decline of the moon. A period of sexual activity was opened by turning the large meteor-hammer kept in Mugasha's temple to face east and then west, according to the phases of the moon (Roscoe 1911, 290). The language of lunar phases linked them to fertility, expressing a hope to reduce fertility's uncertainties by tying them to the reliable phases of the moon. In Luganda, people described the days of reduced work around a new moon with an adjective signifying a delicate fragility.[10] One response to those uncertainties concentrated sexual activity around one moment in the lunar cycle across the land.

The idea of menstrual synchrony, hinted at in the practice of releasing everyone involved in refurbishment to "go home" sometime in the fourth week of their assembly, links fertility quests and shrine activity at Bubembe. The science of menstrual synchrony is equivocal. Some scholars find the evidence for it compelling, while others dispute it (McClintock 1971, 1981; Cutler 1980; Law 1986; Wilson 1992; Yang and Schank 2006). Be that as it may, the fact that menstrual cycles and lunar cycles are both about 29.5 days long has prompted

[7] Kagwa (1918, 217–218) distinguishes "slaves" from "women" in constituting such "gifts" in the 19th century.
[8] Ggomotoka's (1937–1938, Bugaya 21) sources in the Buvuma Islands also distinguished "slaves" from "maids", in listing what canoes carried.
[9] Or in a local banana garden (Roscoe 1911, 24–25; Johnson 2014, 253–255).
[10] The lengths differed from shrine to shrine. Snoxall (1967, 38) reports that the days involved were called *ènnakû za bwerendê* (lit. 'delicate days').

people the world over to think about menstrual timing together with the moon's phases. That makes imposing circumstances of assembly an irresistible way to take advantage of causality. By keeping the temporal doubling in step, with rest and good food, the differences between individual menstrual patterns might be reduced (McClintock 1971; Law 1986). So, the rhythmic assembly that occurred every 20 days embodied the understanding that the end of menstruation was a precondition for biological reproduction. Menstruation may *not* have been the norm for lactating mothers and women on low-fat diets whose daily labour consumed many calories. It may have been so for younger women, not yet biological mothers, who rested and ate foods higher in fat, perhaps at celebratory assemblies like those at Bubembe (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, 45–47). Fertility quests attracted supplicants of all statures to events at Mugasha's shrine.

Conclusion

I'd like to close with a nod to one of our academic grandmothers, Jane Guyer (1996), who taught us that Africa has never been traditional. It has always valued traditions of invention. Guyer's phrase draws attention to the stultifying effects of conceiving of tradition as a kind of anti-time, a changeless and thoughtless hegemonic practice. That view was common to much imperial and colonial knowledge of the lands and peoples they tried to rule. Imperial and colonial ideas about industry and self-mastery, wrapped in a moral blanket of gendered time-sense, too easily consigned to this dead realm of tradition those whose time and gender maps differed from theirs. Traditions of invention show African institutions and habits of thought fostering individual creativity and celebrating engagement with change, continuity, and surprise. They include institutions and habits of thought blending time and gender to inventive ends.

Many people who lived in the societies I've discussed understood *òbùkulù* or greatness as tied, in part, to firstness or early-ness. This inverts the experience of sight in which what is far away appears smaller. First-as-great argues that a close, and gigantic, past bears on a puny, immature present. This quality of vernacular time in historical tales comes across as dense summaries unmoored to linear time but richly expressive of political 'now moments'. The summaries look past calendar time to periods. Such chunky time makes the past simultaneously a resource and an obligation. It is a shifting pool of knowledge and skill that must be expanded or reconfigured in the present. It is an obligation to recognize, critique, and respect those who created that knowledge and developed that skill, such that we in the present may continue the work of maturation. These qualities tell us nothing about the gender of the past. It is in the work of growing, rearing, maturing – the qualities of *òbùkulù* – that people composed, blended, and altered gender, giving it history. The gendered contributions to maturation – and their failures – centre struggles over deciding what to change and what to keep. This practice of moral belonging provides no guarantee of continuity. Failure to agree on what to use and respect and critique of the past in a present leads to division, departure, and reconfiguring.

People must blend time and sexed, gendered bodies in a dialectic with moral imaginations to make the future better than the present. Political forms unevenly distribute capacities to blend time and gender in this way. However, values of assembly, participation, accountability, and self-control restrain the effects of inequality on moral belonging (Hanson 2022). This dynamic interplay between persons, moral imaginations, politics, gender, and time produces traditions of invention. The main threats to its generative capacity lie in extractive statecrafts, above all in forms of slavery, authoritarianism, and the capitalist logics of private property. Traditions of invention – including gender time – can reject those threats.

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