

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE PREHISTORY OF THE BUVUMA ISLAND GROUP OF LAKE VICTORIA

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During the early part of 1967, a short expedition was made to Buvuma and neighbouring islands, primarily as part of a study of the relationship of laterite to landscape development. The characteristic island skyline of flat laterite capped hills is typical of Buganda topography, a topography which has been the source of much discussion (Pallister 1960, etc). The drowning of the topography by Lake Victoria, which left the laterite mesas as islands standing above the lake, has resulted in a particularly attractive variant of the typical Buganda scene. For whatever reason, it appears that these islands were also found particularly attractive by early man, and on them is to be found a remarkable variety of evidence, apparently unparalleled on the adjacent mainland, which indicates an extremely long continuity of habitation. The writer is very grateful to EAFFRO (Jinja) and particularly to Dr. Watts for making the study possible by allowing the use of one of the launches, and also for providing this opportunity to record some of the more interesting archaeological finds. The author also wishes to thank Dr. W.W. Bishop for his critical comments on the manuscript.

The islands of Lake Victoria have been subject to rather sporadic archaeological study. The Sesse Islands have, perhaps by virtue of their greater accessibility, received the most attention (Thomas 1966, Fagan and Lofgren 1966). Recently Lolui Island has been the subject to an intense and co-ordinated investigation, which indicated the wealth of information available in such localities. The Buvuma Island group, comprising Buvuma, Bugaia, Bukwaya, Buziri, Bwema and Kibibi, however, seem to have been somewhat neglected. The few observations available have nevertheless already indicated the time span involved in the occupation of these islands, and the recent observations fully corroborate this.

The oldest evidence of occupation was found on Bugaia island. The flaggy quartzites cleave readily and seem to have provided ideal material for the manufacture of the rather heavy and crude tools of the Sangoan culture - 10-40,000 B.C. (Cole 1965, Posnansky 1966a). This industry seems to be confined to this island alone, and is well represented here by a variety of picks, rough hand-axes, flake knives, heavy scrapers and cores. Only a few scattered tools were found on Buvuma, where the lithology is similar. The artefacts on Bugaia are found eroding out of a red indurated

lateritic palaeosol, and also in the modern grass soil overlying this older soil. The richest sites are to be found on the pediments above which rise the flat topped hills, particularly near Mirongo Bay on the north side of the island, and also on the south east side. The pediments are being rapidly eroded and gullied, apparently due to a change in the local environment. Elsewhere on the island, on the steep bare rocky sides of the hills and on the laterite summits, artefacts are also found but are more thinly scattered. The characteristic weight and crudity of the Sangoan implements suggests that they were specifically designed to deal with a forest environment (Posnansky 1966a, p. 44, Cole 1965, p. 180). Among the cruder tools are to be found some apparently much more skilfully fashioned implements, the smaller step-flaked tools more characteristic of the earlier Acheulian industry. The occurrence of both types together *in situ* conforms with the suggestion (Cole 1965, p. 188) that the apparent lack of skill displayed by the Sangoans was rather an adaptation of their tools to suit a particular environment than that the skills of earlier days were lost as part of some regression. Their occurrence on the islands as well as on the mainland (Patz 1965) raises the question of how the water barrier was crossed. Although Davies, (1967, p. 117) work implies that Sangoan man had some knowledge of boat building, the possibility exists that the lake was then lower or perhaps non-existent. Kendalls work in Pilkington Bay (personal communication, Duke University, USA) suggests a completely dry passage existed between these islands during the possible time span of Sangoan occupation, Until the higher beaches are directly dated, the means by which Sangoan man reached the islands is however a speculative discussion.

The later tool industries are found only in the younger grass soil or exposed on the surface. They are represented by a varied assemblage of microliths fashioned from purer and harder quartzites. They are particularly abundant on the flat summit of Kukwaya Island, but are also common on Bwema and Kibibi. The association of these later industries with this younger soil raises the suggestion that the change in the environment, indicated by these two soils, was a climatic change from wetter conditions to drier, and further suggests that the change occurred between these two industries. However, it appears from studies on the neighbouring mainland that the change to the drier grass environment cannot be precisely dated, but appears to be staggered. On Nakawungu Hill (Patz 1965) the junction between the two soils appears to occur below a horizon containing an artefact assemblage having closer affinities to the Late Acheulian. On Bya-Moniko Hill (Chaplin and McFarlane 1967) engravings on the laterite surface have been taken to indicate that the laterite was exposed to more desiccating conditions very probably during the occupation of an agricultural people, Moreover, many of the hilltops of South Kyagwe are still in

the process of being cleared of their forest cover for purposes of agriculture. This chronological spread in the exposure of the laterite and the development of the thin grass soil suggests that man is responsible for this change, rather than climate. It is therefore tentatively suggested that the distribution of these two stone tool industries in relation to the soils in which they are contained indicates the beginnings of an irreversible change in the landscape induced largely by man, that is, the beginnings of deforestation which results in hardening of the underlying laterite and the development of the thin dry grass soil, which is very readily eroded leaving barren pavements of laterite so characteristic of the Buganda hilltop scene.

The succession of events suggested by the stone tool assemblages is corroborated to a certain extent by the later archaeological evidence on these islands. It is quite clear from the varied field systems on the barren hilltops and sides, that there formerly existed a soil cover suitable for agriculture, where now no soil exists, or where the soil has become waterlogged by the impermeability brought about by the hardening of the laterite. The field systems are particularly interesting in that their variety suggests a length of agricultural occupancy which is surprising in view of some theories as to the recency and origin of agriculture in Uganda. On the hilltops proper, field boundaries consist of banks of lateritic gravel (loose ironstone pisoliths) sometimes as much as four feet high and wide, more reminiscent of earthworks than property boundaries. They in no way compare with the single blocks of rock laid out in line, which were found bounding the fields on Lolui Island (Posnansky 1967), and which are also to be found on the southern portion of Buziri Island, in association with what appear to be hearths made from four large blocks of stone placed on edge. These banks of lateritic gravel, presumed to be field boundaries, are found particularly well developed on one of the least accessible of the islands visited, Bukwaya Island, where they are associated with circular banks which may have been building foundations, and also cairns, taken elsewhere to be burial cairns (Posnansky 1966b). They are also found on Bwema and Bugaia. That the people who made them knew little of the principles of soil conservation is evident from the fact that many are radially arranged on the domed hilltops. Many of the deep gullies which score the hillsides, especially on Bwema and Bugaia, can be seen to relate directly to these fields, which could scarcely have been better designed to promote erosion of the soil from both the hilltops and the flanks. A curious recurrent feature of many of the fields on Bwema Island is a high mound of lateritic rubble placed centrally in these fields.

In contrast, the steep slopes of the hills show that these people were succeeded by agriculturalists who practiced an elaborate system of terracing and soil conservation. Laboriously built and carefully designed terraces, in every way reminiscent of those on the Yugoslav coast, are to

be found on as much as 20 degree slopes on Bugaia island. The terraces are by necessity extremely narrow and are bounded by small rock walls. On the north flank of Bulinda Hill on Bugaia Island, they are associated with round enclosures of blocks of rock, a few feet high, possibly building foundations. They are also associated at this site with an interesting group of what appear to be grinding hollows, arranged in the form of a cross. Buganda is no longer a grain growing area, but that it once was is clearly evidenced by the sporadic occurrence of grinding hollows in the area, for example on Buziri Island and on Kavule Hill in South Kyagwe. Fables of the origins of the Bantu people record the importance of millet to the early Baganda. Posnansky (1966a, p. 161) gives an account of the Baganda fable of the arrival of Death on earth, the result of the return of Nambi to 'heaven' to collect some millet seed which she forgot in her hasty departure to take up her new post as Kintu's wife. Posnansky also notes that the name Mmengo means grindstones. This name occurs on Buvuma Island, where terracing is also found. There is every suggestion that grain growing, hilltop and hillside cultivation and terracing are to be associated, and that this type of agriculture is of some antiquity, predating the introduction of the banana which provided an easier means of sustenance.

Current cultivation of plantains is found today exclusively on the pediments where cultivable soil still remains on these much misused islands. Terracing does not seem to be practiced though erosion of even these shallow pediment slopes is occurring. This recent erosion frequently reveals the underlying laterite which is sterile, and thus progressively more land is being abandoned through misuse.

Three distinct phases of agricultural practice are found on these islands, the earliest and least enlightened associated with the hilltops, the succeeding intensive terrace cultivation associated with the steep flanks, and the current plantain cultivation on the pediments. They present a picture of progressive denudation of the soil from the hilltops down the slopes and into the valleys and onto the pediments, leaving the barren high level landscape of today. This pattern does not appear with comparable clarity on the adjacent mainland, and it is felt that a systematic study of these islands would throw considerable light on the origins of cultivation in Uganda.

The general pattern of events which emerges from this varied assemblage of archaeological evidence is one of progressive alteration of the environment by man, beginning with Acheulian or Sangoan man's interference with the vegetation, which caused a series of chain reactions -

the hardening of the laterite and induration of the old soil, the development of the grass soil, the progressive erosion of this soil by a series of different agricultural practices – the result being the rather barren aspect of many of the islands today. This suggested pattern is extremely tentative. The variety of the evidence available on these islands certainly indicates that to those more directly concerned with studies of this nature a systematic examination and description of these features may be extremely remunerative. Innumerable isolated finds of archaeological interest are preserved here which may in suitable hands provide the tools for a more proper analysis of the situation. Many of the remains may merely date from the clearances but many are certainly of some antiquity. For example, for what purpose and by whom was the deep (*circa*. 7'') funnel shaped font carved out of an isolated block of laterite which stands pedestal-like on the summit of Nagambwa hill on Bwema Island, amid the earliest field systems? Also the shallow basins carved on the laterite blocks similarly placed on the summit of Naminage hill on Buziri Island. In contrast to the funnel shaped font, these are shaped like grinding hollows, but as they are formed in laterite which would pulverise easily they could not have been used for this purpose (although a single grindstone was found on the pediment below the hill). Moreover, they appear to be grouped in pairs, reminiscent of those described on the Longoro Stone, Kilimanjaro (Fosbrooke and Sassoon 1965), and seem to have been for the purpose of ritual. Are the broken fragments of pottery, found in these basins, in any way related to their original purpose, or merely more recently deposited? For what purpose were the many mounds of black soil on Bagete hill on Buvuma Island. These appear like a rash on the air photos and are associated with a rectangular trench dug in the soil.

There is indeed a wealth of archaeological material available on these neglected islands. It is heartening that the Sangoan material, collected from Bugaia on this occasion and now housed at the Uganda Museum, will be shortly studied by Dr. Nenquin (Ghent University), who hopes also to visit these islands during his study of Lupemban industries in Uganda. It is hoped that this sketchy outline may serve the purpose of illustrating how urgently needed is further specialist study.

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