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The Story of Kintu and his Sons

Naming, Ethnic Identity Formation and Power in the Precolonial Great Lakes Region of East Africa*

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Abstract

This essay investigates the historical background of ethnic disunity in today's Western Uganda as part of the Great Lakes Region of East Africa. In general, there are two opposing views with respect to the existence of ethnicity in precolonial times. On the one hand, social scientists state that the existence of ethnic groups is an invention of the joint work of colonial administrators and professional ethnologists. On the other hand, several scholars argue that ethnicity is an ancient phenomenon predating colonial times. In the past decades, the study into the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region has made great progress. The interdisciplinary approach of historical linguistics, history and anthropology revealed a fascinating and complex history of languages and cultures. However, the history of the different peoples who spoke these languages and built up these cultures is much less known, in particular about how they interacted with each other and how they judged socio-cultural differences. For example, what names they gave each other. This essay tries to give an impetus for further interdisciplinary research about the existence of ethnicity in precolonial times. Identity formation within and between groups is related to power structures in societies. Therefore, investigating ethnicity in precolonial times has to be carried out in the context of developing power structures.

Prologue

One of the stories in the rich mythology of the Great Lakes Region of East Africa is as follows:

When the first man was created by God, there were no names, so he was simply called Kintu, which means "created thing or person". He had three sons but it was very confusing for them not to have names. So, Kintu asked God if they could be given names. God agreed but he proposed two tests for the boys to select the names. In the first test, the boys should select some items that were placed along a path where they would find them. For the second test, the boys had to keep bowls of milk on their lap during a night until morning. When their father Kintu came back in the morning, he found the three boys with their pots. The youngest son had a full pot. The second had a pot that was half full. But the oldest son had no milk left. And so, based on these two tests that had been proposed by God, Kintu gave his sons names. The oldest son was named Kairu, which means "little peasant" for he had shown that he knew nothing about the value of cattle or milk. He had spilled all his milk, and he had chosen potatoes and millet from the items along the path. He and all his descendants forever would be farmers and servants. The second son received the name Kahuma, which means "little

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herder.” This is because he had chosen the leather thong, used for tying up cattle. Only half of his milk was missing. The youngest son had all his milk. And he had chosen the head of an ox in the first test. Kintu called him Kakama, which means “little mukama.” A mukama is a ruler.¹

Names like “Kahuma” still exist in the today’s Western part of the Great Lakes Region in the form of *Bahuma/Bahima* (referring to pastoral people) and have been given an ethnic connotation in the course of the history. But was there something like ethnicity in the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region in Eastern Africa? Did there exist ethnic groups in the distant past? Are current ethnic problems rooted in the ancient history of this region? I will here map the diverse views in the academic discussion on this issue of the last forty years.

Introduction

In the early morning of the 5th of July 2014 several armed groups raided police posts in three districts of Western Uganda and killed more than 90 people. About 130 attackers were arrested during the first days after the riots. Newspaper reports and statements of local and national politicians (among them the President of the country) referred to radicals among ethnic groups in the region as culprits.² In the last week of November 2016, police and army intervened at the request of the President in new ethnic clashes in the region. The crackdown of police and army forces resulted in at least 126 deaths.³ These tragic events are low points in the relations between ethnic groups in a region with a history of again and again flaring ethnic conflicts during the past decades. Officially, Uganda has sixty-five ethnic groups. The Western Uganda districts are home to at least ten ethnic groups.⁴ In the post-colonial period, ethnic cleavages and conflicts have dominated Uganda’s history and politics.⁵ The Western Region has had its share of ethnic conflicts; ever since Uganda got its independence in 1962, the region is characterized by troubled ethnic relations and has

¹ John Beattie, *Bunyoro. An African Kingdom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), pp. 11-12; Birgitta Farelius, *Origins of Kingship. Traditions and Symbolism in the Great Lakes Region of Africa* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2012), pp. 244-245.

² New Vision 7-7-2014; Daily Monitor 7-7-2014; Daily Monitor 14-7-2014.

³ Daily Monitor 29-11-2016; The Washington Post 29-11-2016.

⁴ In Uganda ethnic groups are officially recognized in the constitution. See: the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda 1995. National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy. Third Schedule; Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (as at 15th February 2006). Third Schedule. Document retrieved from internet, 20-7-2014: <http://www.osall.org.za/docs/2011/03/Uganda-Abridged-Constitution-2006.pdf>

The Uganda Bureau of Statistics in “The 2002 Uganda Population and Housing Census. Population Composition” (Kampala, 2002), pp. 25-26 mentions ten ethnic groups in Western Uganda and a group of “others” of 7%. Officially, Uganda has 4 regions: Central, Northern, Eastern and Western. The regions are in turn divided into districts. The Western Region has 26 districts. The national government interacts directly with the districts, so regions do not have any definite role in the administration.

⁵ Odoi-Tanga, F., *Politics, Ethnicity and Conflict in Post-Independent Acholiland, Uganda 1962-2006*. (PhD Thesis, University of Pretoria, South Africa, 2009); Okuku, Juma, *Ethnicity, State Power and the Democratization Process in Uganda*. (Discussion Paper no. 17. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2002); Byarugaba, E.F., “Ethnopolitics and the State. Lessons from Uganda. In: Salih, M.A. & J. Markakis (eds.) *Workshop on Ethnicity and the State in Eastern Africa*, (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1998) pp. 180-189.

witnessed a number of civil wars in the form of guerrilla warfare.⁶ Are these ethnic conflicts deeply rooted in the ancient past?

Humans have always divided society into separate social groups; people have traditionally distinguished between members belonging to their own group and those who belong to other groups. But why do people organise themselves in ethnic groups? When do members of a group create a recognizable ethnic name for themselves or receive a name from outsiders? This essay investigates the historical background of ethnic disunity in today's Western Uganda as part of the Great Lakes Region of East Africa. Basically there are two opposing views on the historical origins of ethnicity. On the one hand, social scientists and historians writing on Sub-Saharan Africa in general like Terence Ranger (1983), Jean-Loup Amselle (1998), John Reader (1998), and Bruce Berman (2010) claim that the invention of ethnic groups is the joint work of colonial administrators, and professional ethnologists.⁷ With respect to the history of ethnicity in Uganda authors like Odoi-Tanga (2009), Okuku (2002) and Byarugaba (1998) agree with this claim.⁸ Others writing about Equatorial Africa and the Great Lakes Region, such as the historians Christopher Ehret (1988), Jan Vansina (1991) and Jean-Pierre Chrétien (2003) and the social scientists John Lonsdale (1994), Gérard Prunier (1999), Luc de Heusch (2000), Mahmood Mamdani (2001), and Anthony Smith (2010) also refer to precolonial ethnic dynamics. Terence Ranger joined this group by adjusting his earlier view and emphasizing the dynamics of precolonial ethnicity in an article published in 1994.⁹

In the following sections I will investigate whether processes of ethnic identity formation have taken place in the precolonial era of the Great Lakes Region and Western Uganda in particular. Processes of group and identity formation within societies are generally influenced by power relations. Therefore, I also pay attention to increasing complexity of power structures in the precolonial interlacustrine societies and the extent to which power relations influence identity formation. This discussion of ethnicity in the precolonial Great

⁶ Kabarole Research and Resource Centre. *Stuck in the Mist. Contextual Analysis of the Conflicts in the Rwenzori Region*. (Fort Portal: Kabarole Research and Resource Centre, 2012); Prunier, Gerard, "Rebel Movements and Proxy Warfare: Uganda, Sudan and the Congo (1986–99)." In: *African Affairs*, (2004), 103/412, 359–383.

⁷ Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa." In: Hobsbawm, Eric & Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 248, 261-262; Jean-Loup Amselle, *Mestizo Logics. Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 11; John Reader, *Africa. A Biography of the Continent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), p. 616; Bruce J. Berman, *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa* (Tokyo: JICA-RI Working Paper, 2010), p. 2.

⁸ See footnote 4.

⁹ C. Ehret, "The East African Interior." In: M. El Fasi (ed.) *Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century. General History of Africa*, Vol. III. (London: UNESCO/Heinemann, 1988), p. 626; Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests. Towards a History of Political Traditions in Equatorial Africa* (London: James Currey, 1991), p. 19-20; John Lonsdale, "Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism." In: Preben Kaarsholm (ed.) *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Roskilde: Roskilde University, 1994), pp. 139; Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa. Two Thousand Years of History* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), p. 83; Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis. History of a Genocide* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1999), pp.23-40; Luc de Heusch, "L'ethnie. The vicissitudes of a concept". In: *Social Anthropology*, 8, 2 (2000), p. 104; Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers. Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2001), p. 102; Anthony D. Smith, "Structure and Persistence of *Ethnie*". In: Montserrat Guibernau & John Rex (eds.), *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 27; Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa". In: Preben Kaarsholm (ed.), *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Roskilde: Roskilde University, 1994), pp. 24-25, 29.

Lakes Region, however, does not imply the claim that processes of (ethnic) identity formation are the same in the past and the present.

Before providing a sketch of the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region and today's Western Uganda, a general theoretical perspective on ethnicity as well as some methodological problems will be briefly discussed in the next section. Then, in the next section, a sketch of the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region will be presented, based on an analysis of academic literature. This historical story is a search for the existence of ethnicity and ethnic groups in the context of environmental, socio-cultural and political developments. In the second last section, I will briefly review the scope of the theoretical perspective and the methodological approach and discuss the possibilities and limitations of historical research in the ancient East-African interlacustrine societies without written sources. Finally, the summarizing conclusions.

The study of ethnicity in the precolonial Great Lakes Region of East Africa: theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches

The African Great Lakes Region is situated between Lake Victoria and the Lakes Tanganyika, Kivu, Edward and Albert to the west and Lake Kyoga to the north. (See Annex: Map Great Lakes Region.) This region comprises the present countries Burundi, Rwanda, the north-eastern part of the Democratic Republic Congo, Uganda and north-western Kenya and Tanzania. The region covers about 415.000 square kilometres and linguists consider the Bantu languages spoken there as belonging to a branch of the wider Bantu family of languages. The region is characterized by a tremendous environmental diversity. It is a rich agricultural environment and its human history extends far in ancient times. In the course of its long history different systems of subsistence production coexisted and succeeded each other in the different ecological sub-regions: fishing, food gathering and hunting, and sorghum and finger millet production and cattle breeding. The region is famous for its excellent ancient iron production and its powerful states existing long before the first Europeans visited this part of Africa.¹⁰

Theoretical perspectives on ethnicity

In the social sciences the concept of ethnicity is debated and there are several theoretical approaches. Generally speaking, ethnicity can be circumscribed as the categorization of groups of people which consider themselves, and are considered by others, as being (culturally) distinct.¹¹ Anthony Smith defines an ethnic community as a "named human population with shared ancestry myths, histories, cultures and having an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity."¹² This definition has an objectivistic and essentialist character but can be interpreted in a flexible way and in the context of this article Smith's conception serves as a starting point. Smith rejects language as a distinctive feature of ethnicity while some other authors argue that an ethnicity is by nature a single

¹⁰ David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place. Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Porthmouth: Heinemann, 1998), pp.19-22; Robert Maxon, *East Africa*. Third Edition. (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2009), pp.1-11; Yvonne Bastin, "The Interlacustrine Zone (Zone J)". In: Derek Nurse & Gérard Philippson (eds.), *The Bantu Languages*. (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 502.

¹¹ Thomas H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism. Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 4.

¹² Anthony D. Smith, "Structure and Persistence of *Ethnie*". In: Montserrat Guibernau & John Rex (eds.), *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 27.

language community.¹³ In this essay, language is considered as one of the socio-cultural factors in the description of ethnicity and ethnic groups. Language can often be used as a marker for ethnic identity.¹⁴ However, a common language is only one of the components which may characterize an ethnic group or community. Linguistic and ethnic groups do not always overlap and are not identical by definition. Not any one of the characterizing elements of ethnicity in Smith' description – including a common language – is essential. It can be stated that the more elements a group shares, the more one should consider it an ethnic group.

Is it possible to transplant the concept of ethnicity to the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region in Eastern Africa? In her book *Origins of Kingship. Traditions and Symbolism in the Great Lakes Region of Africa* (2012) Birgitta Farelus proposes to investigate these precolonial societies and their political institutions from the perspective of the peoples and expressed in their own languages. Therefore, she avoids the terms “tribe” and “ethnicity” and employs the Bantu word *ihanga* translated as “nationality”. The historian and linguist David Schoenbrun refers to the same word and translates it in terms of “a distant, foreign group” in his book *A Green Place, A Good Place. Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (1998).¹⁵ These proposed solutions perfectly illustrate the dilemmas of historical research on ancient societies with oral traditions.

It is not just this different interpretation of indigenous concepts which complicates the study of precolonial societies in the Great Lakes Region. The modern concept of ethnicity is itself controversial in social sciences. One of the most influential conceptions of ethnicity is provided by Frederick Barth's discussion of the phenomenon. He states that an ethnic group is defined through its relationships to other groups, highlighted by the boundary between the groups. The boundary marking itself should then be defined as a social product which may have variable importance and which may itself change through time. The concept of ethnic boundary places the focus of ethnic studies on the relationship between groups. Barth sees an ethnic group mainly as a social organization. This means that Barth advocates a relational and processual approach to ethnicity.¹⁶ Since the 1990s, more authors turned their attention to the importance of culture in their studies on ethnicity and ethnic conflicts.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Barth's discussion of ethnicity provided a useful corrective to the idea of ethnicity as a fixed, unchanging and clearly delimited set of social and cultural characteristics of a people as is expressed in the term “tribe”. Such an essentialist approach of the phenomenon of ethnicity still exists - in particular in political sciences. In general, two opposite theoretical approaches can be distinguished about ethnicity. On the one side, essentialist and primordial perspectives considering culture and ethnicity as clearly

¹³ Among others: Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 31.

¹⁴ H. Ekkehard Wolff, “Language and Society”. In: Heine, Bernd & Derek Nurse, *African Languages. An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.301.

¹⁵ Birgitta Farelus, *Origins of Kingship. Traditions and Symbolism in the Great Lakes Region of Africa* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2012), pp. 3, 20, 23; David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place. Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Porthmouth: Heinemann,1998), p. 94.

¹⁶ Frederick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries . The social organization of culture difference* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969), pp.14-15; Erikson (2002), pp. 11-13.

¹⁷ See for example Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity. Arguments and Explorations*. Second Edition (London: Sage Publications, 2008); Joane Nagel, “Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture.” In: *Social Problems*, Vol. 41, No. 1, (1994), pp. 152-176.

delimited, closed constellations of practices and beliefs and sets of cultural and social characteristics emotionally linked to a specific people and territory. On the other side, constructive and instrumentalist views that emphasize the historically, socially constructed and open character of culture and the situational, strategically defined features of ethnicity.¹⁸

The social model of ethnicity introduced by Barth forces to recognize that power relations play an important role in the phenomenon of group formation along ethnic lines. Among others, Joane Nagel recognizes the importance of Barth's work when it comes to examine power relations related to the shaping of ethnic boundaries. According to Nagel, power relations and politics are not only involved on the level of the social construction of boundaries, but also on the level of identity construction through categorization.¹⁹ In particular, instrumentalist views on ethnicity define it as a tool used by individuals, groups or elites to obtain power. In this approach, ethnicity is a rational choice and is inextricably linked to politics.²⁰ This strict linkage as well as the rational basis of ethnicity that it implies, can be questioned.

It is useful to refer here to a discussion among some authors about the importance of precolonial state formation in the process of the emergence of ethnic identities.²¹ Since the publication of the book *African Political Systems* (1940) by the British anthropologists Meyer Fortes and Edward E. Evans Pritchard there is no doubt about the existence of public power in stateless or acephalous societies in Sub-Sahara Africa. They referred to the lineage system performing political functions and being the principal base for political decision-making and social equilibrium.²² However, the book was also heavily criticized for its static, ahistorical and functional image of the political organization of societies.²³ Moreover, since the publication of the book, Africanists began to see continuities between societies with and without a state. In the decades that followed the publication of the book, further extensive research showed that not only lineage and hierarchical chieftaincy structures but also horizontal power relations in categories of age, gender, descent, associations and religious institutions played a role in the organization of societies with respect to defence, security and the (re)distribution of wealth. To summarize: all these components constitute "complexity" in power structures of Sub-Sahara societies in general, and in the

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973); Barth (1969); Eriksen (2002); Jenkins (2008); Ranger (1994); Lonsdale (1994). It may be asked if a synthesis of the two theoretical approaches can clarify complicated conflict situations in which deep rooted ethnic emotions are manipulated by (self-appointed) leaders or local politicians. For this approach, see Jimmy Spire Ssentongo, *Spaces for Pluralism in 'Ethnically Sensitive' Communities in Uganda. The Case of the Kibaale District*. (Utrecht: University of Humanistic Studies, 2015), pp. 19-27.

¹⁹ Nagel (1994), p. 155.

²⁰ David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 5-6.

²¹ Ranger (1994), p. 21. Ranger mentions, among others, the following authors: Werner Sollors, "Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity". In: W. Sollors (ed.), *The Invention of Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Martin Channock, *Law, Custom and Social Order. The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Leroy Vail, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London: James Currey, 1989); Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rain Forest. Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa*. (London: James Currey, 1990); Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals. Anthropology and History in Tanzania*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1990).

²² M. Fortes & E.E. Evans Pritchard, "Introduction". In: *African Political Systems* (London: Oxford University Press), 1940, pp.11-12.

²³ Hans Schoenmakers, *The Power of Culture. A Short History of Anthropological Theory about Culture and Power* (Groningen, University of Groningen/Groningen Globalisation Studies, 2012), p. 60.

interlacustrine world in particular.²⁴ Summarizing, power relations can play an important role in the formation of ethnic identities and it is interesting to investigate how power and political structures are analysed in academic research and are related to the (possible) existence of ethnic groups in the precolonial Great Lakes Region.

Given the discussions above it is justified to conceptualize ethnicity in relational, processual, dynamic, and constructive terms. The concept of ethnicity will be used as an exploratory tool to investigate what kind of processes of identity formation occurred in the precolonial Great Lakes Region and not as projection of a modern social phenomenon in the past.²⁵

Methodological approach

Birgitta Farelus' proposal for a historical interpretation of the precolonial past of the Great Lakes Region (in her case the origins of kingship) from the perspective of the peoples expressed in their languages fits in a recent trend of comparative-historical linguistic research about the ancient social and cultural history of the region. It is useful to address here briefly the principal methods of comparative-historical linguistics and to evaluate the possibilities and pitfalls of these methods and of an interdisciplinary approach – combining comparative-historical linguistics, history, archaeology and anthropology – in the study of the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region. In general, historical linguists classify languages in families and sketch models of their historical development. Once classified, they try to reconstruct earlier forms of present languages and provide direct evidence of words and their meanings in the past. They also seek to explain linguistic innovations that are revealed in their reconstructions and which are caused by internal developments or by contact with other language communities. In the case of unwritten languages (like the interlacustrine Bantu languages in precolonial times) similarities and differences in present-day languages of the same family are analysed and underlying forms uncovered that might reflect versions of the parent or proto-language. This technique of reconstruction is called the Comparative Method.²⁶ In particular, two subfields of historical linguistics provided new data and information about the ancient history of the region: lexicostatistics and glottochronology. Lexicostatistics is the statistical study of vocabulary of a language with special attention to the historical links with other languages. Subsequently, linguists often design family tree diagrams to illustrate the relationship and development of languages and groups of languages within families. The development of languages is thus shown from an early historical phase (for example, a proto or ancestral language) to a later point in history. A tree model demonstrates the split of daughter languages from mother languages.

²⁴ Susan K. McIntosh, "Pathways to Complexity: An African Perspective." In: Susan K. McIntosh (ed.), *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 4, 9,22.

²⁵ Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity without Groups" (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p.36-37.

²⁶ Derek Nurse, "The Contributions of Linguistics to the Study of History in Africa". In: *Journal of African History*, Vol. 38 , no. 3 (1997), pp. 359, 361; Schadeberg, Thilo C., "Historical Linguistics". In : Derek Nurse & Gérard Philippson (eds.), *The Bantu Languages*. (London: Routledge, 2003), p.156; Kembo-Sure & Vic Webb, "Linguistics: An Overview". In: Vic Webb & Kembo-Sure (eds.), *African Voices. An Introduction to the Languages and Linguistics of Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa Ltd., 2000), pp. 83-84; Birgitta Farelus, (2012), pp. 59-65; Jan Vansina, "New Linguistic Evidence and 'the Bantu Expansion' " In: *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (1995), pp. 173, 179-180; David Schoenbrun, (1998), pp. 37-52; David Schoenbrun, "We Are What We Eat: Ancient Agriculture between the Great Lakes" In: *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1993b), pp. 6-7; David Schoenbrun, *The Historical Reconstruction of Great Lakes Bantu Cultural Vocabulary. Etymologies and Distributions* (Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 1997), pp. 9-18.

Glottochronology is a subset of lexicostatistics and studies historical relationships and developments between languages and tries to date these developments.²⁷

However, these methods are also disputed and most historical linguists are careful with the outcomes resulting from the deployment of these methodological instruments. Besides investigating vocabularies and their statistical processing, they look to morphology, syntax and semantic shifts, sociolinguistics, computational linguistics, phonetics, while reconstructing language history.²⁸ In this context, historical linguists seldom locate language change and development in time, they date linguistic phenomena relative to each other. For dating in time of language developments interdisciplinary research with historians is necessary.²⁹ The linguist Derek Nurse refers to the fact that most innovations in historical linguistics indeed have consisted in incorporating findings from other sub-disciplines of linguistics. Disputes among linguists focus on how far they can incorporate these innovations and how far they want to engage in dialogue with non-linguists like historians, archaeologists and anthropologists. In the context of these disputes, in particular the exclusive use of family tree diagrams, lexicostatistics and glottochronology are criticized.³⁰ Remarkably, most historians have considerably less trouble with the use of these methods. Prominent historians of Central and Eastern Africa like Jan Vansina and Christopher Ehret use linguistic methods and do not reject lexicostatistics or its subset glottochronology. David Schoenbrun, writing about the history of interlacustrine Africa, investigates the chronological dimensions of the languages of this region with the help of lexicostatistics and glottochronology. Birgitta Farelus explains carefully the controversies with respects to these methods but adopts the view of the linguist Derek Nurse who characterizes the statistical methods as a survey and not as an in-depth study.³¹

It is not surprising that historians are especially interested in vocabularies – and less in the other linguistic sub-disciplines - with respect to the reconstruction work of linguists. Vocabulary allows direct access to cultural terms and concepts used by historic populations in the past. Names that refer to social institutions and activities, the spiritual world, the economy, food production, crops, flora and fauna, tools and weapons are important in historical reconstructions. Without any doubt, historical linguists contribute to the reconstruction of vocabulary and conceptions and the understanding of the meanings which the historical actors gave to their world and their experiences. It is primarily historians with

²⁷ Derek Nurse, "The Contributions of Linguistics to the Study of History in Africa". In: *Journal of African History*, Vol. 38, no. 3 (1997), pp. 361, 363-364, 366, 369.

²⁸ Morphology: structure of words; Syntax: grammatical arrangement of words. See: Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (London: Collins Cobuild 1991)

²⁹ Personal communication Professor Maarten Mous, Centre of Linguistics/African Languages and Cultures, Leiden University, The Netherlands (14-8-2015). See also Derek Nurse (1997), p. 375 and Thilo C. Schadeberg (2003), p. 160.

³⁰ Derek Nurse, "The Contributions of Linguistics to the Study of History in Africa." In: *Journal of African History*, Vol. 38, no. 3 (1997), p. 361, 365-366, 370-371;

³¹ Jan Vansina, "New Linguistic Evidence and 'the Bantu Expansion'" In: *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (1995), pp. 173, 180; Christopher Ehret, "Language and History". In: Heine, Bernd & Derek Nurse (eds.), *African Languages. An Introduction*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000), p. 287; David L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place. Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Porthmouth: Heinemann, 1998), p. 40; Birgitta Farelus, *Origins of Kingship. Traditions and Symbolism in the Great Lakes Region of Africa* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2012), p. 65.

linguistic training who sketch the broader socio-cultural environment and who date the historical period in which the reconstructed languages and vocabularies functioned.³²

In this essay, the review of literature of historians with linguistic training will be guiding in answering the question about the emergence of ethnic groups and ethnicity in precolonial interlacustrine Africa. It goes without saying that research of archaeologists and anthropologists also contributes to the analysis of the problem. In the second last section of this article, I will return to the problem of the possibilities and the limitations of doing historical research in the ancient societies of the Great Lakes Region.

A Sketch of the Ancient History of the Great Lakes Region

The study of the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region is conjectural and hypothetical, an attempt to reconstruct the ways of life of peoples as far as the combined linguistic, archaeological and anthropological evidence will allow.³³ Changes in society will often be marked by changes in words and their meanings.³⁴ Moreover, the history of a language shows the way to the history of the people who spoke that language in the past. Therefore, this section begins with a brief overview of the history of the languages in the ancient Great Lakes Region.

The “Bantu Expansion” and the Spread of Bantu Languages

Language is one of the features with which a people can distinguish itself from other peoples. As a socio-cultural phenomenon, language is handed down and partially modified from generation to generation. A language is a collection of dialects which are mutually understandable. A language is a dialect continuum, usually the result of territorial spread. Large language communities can split into smaller units and spread across the region. Over time, dialects then become mutually unintelligible and differentiate into new languages. The dynamics of the spread of language change are entirely social: relative isolation fosters rapid differentiation between languages, while constant communication slows it down.³⁵

Historical linguists generally agree that the cradle of the Bantu-speaking communities of the Great Lakes Region lay somewhere in the border region of present Nigeria and Cameroon.³⁶ The ancestors of Bantu-speaking peoples began their moves to the south and

³² Derek Nurse, “The Contributions of Linguistics to the Study of History in Africa.” In: *Journal of African History*, Vol. 38, no. 3 (1997), p. 380-382.

³³ J.E.G Sutton, “East Africa before the seventh century.” In: G. Mokhtar (ed.), *General History of Africa. Vol. II. Ancient Civilizations*. (London: UNESCO/Heinemann, 1981), p. 568.

³⁴ Schoenbrun (1998), p. 6. Schoenbrun refers to language as fundamentally social. Because historical linguistics is about the history of words and their meanings I prefer to also involve the cultural domain. Meaning making and giving meaning to one’s natural and social environment is not only a social but also a cultural activity.

³⁵ Vansina (1995), pp. 173-174.

³⁶ Derek Nurse, “The Contributions of Linguistics to the Study of History in Africa”. In: *Journal of African History*, Vol. 38, no. 3 (1997), pp. 361, 378-379. Since the early 1990s, studies in comparative historical linguistics reached some unexpected results which required a revision of earlier visions on the history of the Bantu languages and communities. The proposition was that the Bantu languages spread over a large part of central, eastern and southern Africa as the result of a single continuous migration or “expansion”. It was stated that this migration was fuelled by a population explosion which was produced by the introduction of farming, and later metallurgy. It is now stated that, in general, the dynamics of the differentiation in Bantu languages passed off not along specific routes. Spread and distribution of Bantu languages appears to be an irregular historical

east as early as 3000 BC. These peoples spoke so-called proto-Bantu languages (ancestral Bantu languages) and arrived in the Great Lakes Region at about 500 BC. Here they came into contact with peoples speaking different non-Bantu languages (Central Sudanic, Eastern Sahelian, and Southern Cushitic) and living in food producing communities. Subsequently, the expansion of proto-Bantu languages continued to about AD 100 and at about AD 500 the Great Lakes Bantu-speakers had evolved into different language groups and came to dominate almost the whole area. Non-Bantu languages were assimilated in the different proto-Bantu languages.³⁷

In general, the dynamics of the differentiation in Bantu languages passed off not along specific routes.³⁸ Spread and differentiation of proto-Bantu was a complex set of broad processes of linguistic divergence in which many communities of people forming dialect chains in different environmental zones were involved. The Bantu language differentiation and the emergence of new languages is characterized by “pulses of expansion, interspersed with long periods of slow growth, which could lead to repeated resettlements of areas already populated by other Bantu speakers”.³⁹ Jan Vansina sketches a fascinating scenario for the way in which the dispersal of proto-Bantu languages may have taken place. It is a story about large households living together in villages of perhaps up to 500 persons having contact with camps of nomadic foragers. A few households and their leaders discover that there are patches of more fertile lands about 50 km away and decided to move. This movement of leaders with their households, the emergence of new villages, the repetition of such movements by new generations illustrates the process of the spread of the proto-Bantu language as occurring in irregular movements of groups of people which remained in good communication with each other. The diffusion was sometimes halted, but sooner or later it started again. It probably included reverses as well as advances. The whole process involved many centuries.⁴⁰

Through language people identify themselves as groups and distinguish themselves from others. The archaeologist and historian J.E.G. Sutton suggests that in case of mutual unintelligibility of languages, people of the different language groups saw themselves as completely alien to each other.⁴¹

The Early and Late Iron Age: cattle herds, banana gardens, and emerging social complexity

Archaeologists, historians and historical linguists increasingly integrate their research and this resulted, among others, in the premise that environmental change in the past has influenced, to different degrees, the activities and the cultural, social, and political-economic organization of ancient societies in the Great Lakes Region.⁴² The combined efforts have led to a clearer picture of the ancient history of the region since some decades.

process. See also Farelus (2012), p. 77; Robert Maxon *East Africa*. (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, Third Edition, 2009), p. 28; Vansina (1995), p. 186. Vansina speaks of a cluster of “Bantoid” languages.

³⁷ Farelus (2012), pp. 64-65, 79-80; Maxon (2009), p. 28-29; Schoenbrun (1993a), p. 22, 83; Derek Nurse & Gérard Philippson, “Introduction”. In : Derek Nurse & Gérard Philippson (eds.) *The Bantu Languages*. (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), p.5.

³⁸ Vansina (1995), p. 188.

³⁹ Schoenbrun (1998),pp. 43-44; See also Maxon (2009), p. 32

⁴⁰ Vansina (1995), pp. 191-193

⁴¹ J.E.G Sutton (1981), p. 568.

⁴² D. Taylor, P. Robertshaw & R.A. Marchant, “Environmental Change and Political-Economic Upheaval in Precolonial Western Uganda.” In: *The Holocene*, 10, 4 (2000), p. 528; Ceri Z. Ashley pleads for a “socialised

Archaeologists explain that ironworking requires a high level of knowledge and experience and caused environmental changes. There existed a remarkable diversity of technologies in this region but all were time consuming. Ironworking is seen as a powerful technology and smelting as a dangerous procedure, leading to a highly complex system of prescribed and required behaviours. The work was mostly done by a specialised class or caste. In the Early Iron Age (roughly from 500 BC until 1000 AD), iron working occurred mainly in the south-western part of the Great Lakes Region. The agricultural achievements of the Bantu farmers and herders and the growth of “eclectic food systems” resulted from integrating knowledge from their non-Bantu neighbours and was stimulated by the development of the iron technology. Iron tools contributed to a higher productivity of agricultural activities. The people in the different communities became most probably multilingual but spoke increasingly Great Lakes Bantu as a *lingua franca*. This is also the period of the so-called Urewe pottery.⁴³ The archaeological studies on the use of these Urewe ceramics, on furnaces and iron objects and on the development of agricultural technology combined with linguistic research give a picture of increasing complex social relationships within the Bantu speaking communities of the Great Lakes Region.⁴⁴

Gradually, iron working also took place in more northerly regions and there developed a link between ironworking and political power.⁴⁵ A number of fascinating archaeological sites – dating from the Late Iron Age - attest to this emerging hierarchical social structures and the presence of iron furnaces.⁴⁶ Shrines and remnants of earthworks and settlements refer to an increasing social complexity. Two archaeological sites, located close to each other, Ntusi and Bigo, bear witness to this development. Both ancient settlements are located in the middle Katonga valley south of the Katonga River (See Annex Map). The impressive scale of the two sites suggest considerable labour inputs and a stratified socio-political order. At Ntusi, on the northern side facing Bigo, remains of iron smelting activities are found. Moreover, there is evidence of ivory working.⁴⁷ (For the significance of these sites in the historical process of increasing political and cultural complexity, see below.)

What led to the establishment of the settlement of Ntusi? Between approximately 900 and 1100 AD, a major regional transformation took place in the interlacustrine agricultural systems based on root crops, grain crops, fishing and cattle breeding: the introduction of specialized herding practices and bananas.⁴⁸

archaeology” that stimulates research and discussion on the role of artefacts (like ceramics and iron objects) as active social tools in the context of their specific socio-cultural and economic environments. In: “Towards a Socialised Archaeology of Ceramics in Great Lakes Africa.” In: *The African Archaeological Review*, Vol.27, no. 2 (2012), p. 139.

⁴³ The name Urewe pottery or ceramics is derived from the archaeological site Urewe in Kenya, not far from Lake Victoria. Ashley (2012), p. 139,142. See also Bernard Clist, “A Critical Reappraisal of the Chronological Framework of the Early Urewe Iron Age Industry.” In: *Muntu*, 6 (1987), p. 38.

⁴⁴ Taylor *at all.*, (2000), p. 530-531; Schoenbrun (1993b), p. 22; Schoenbrun (1998), p. 71.

⁴⁵ Rachel MacLean, “Iron Working and the Iron Age in Africa.” *Oxford Bibliography* (2012). Retrieved from internet: 2-3-2015. <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199846733> ; J. Cameron Monroe, “The Archaeology of the Precolonial State in Africa.” In: Peter Mitchell & Paul J. Lane (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. PDF version. On line Publication, 2013), p. 8.

⁴⁶ Most archaeologists date the Late Iron Age between approximately 1000 AD and 1700 AD.

⁴⁷ J. E. G. Sutton, “The Antecedents of the Interlacustrine Kingdoms.” In: *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1993), pp. 52-57; Ann Brower Stahl, “Political Economic Mosaics: Archaeology of the Last Two Millennia in Tropical Sub-Saharan Africa.” In: *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33 (2004), p. 156.

⁴⁸ Schoenbrun (1998), p. 74.

Around AD 800, Rutaran speaking farmers, living at the south-western shores of Lake Victoria, were facing environmental degradation problems.⁴⁹ The extensive food production system combining a wide range of crops and animals and incorporating ironworking had a negative impact on the environment and some farmers began to move into the unsettled grasslands of Nkore. The trek to the grasslands was accompanied by the development of specialized herding practices (pastoralism). In a period that lasted until about AD 1500, an impressive list of new names was invented for the colours of cows and a name for the famous long horned (Ankole) cattle. Besides Rutaran speakers, other language groups living in the Kivu Rift Valley began to integrate cattle in their way of live.⁵⁰ The different parts of the Ntusi site were occupied between the eleventh and fifteenth century. In spite of the development of a form of specialized herding in this period, both pastoralism and agriculture were practiced at the same time at the excavated remnants of households in Ntusi. Archaeological evidence suggests that a chiefdom may have been based here.⁵¹

The incorporation of bananas into the food production systems of the Great Lakes Region was a long process and cannot yet be dated precisely. Sporadic cultivation must have taken place between AD 500 and 900. There are indications that bananas are planted northwest of Lake Victoria in the tenth century. Between approximately 800 and 1300 AD, Rutaran farmers to the south of the Lake invented new names for bananas and banana gardens. Also names for varieties of banana beer and names for “chief’s banana garden” and for billhooks pop up in the language. Also to the west, in the highlands of today’s Rwanda and Burundu new names for bananas and beer enrich the languages of the West Highlands peoples in this period. Between 1300 and 1500, Rutaran and North Nyanza societies on the west side of Lake Victoria cultivated intensively bananas. In the centuries that followed, the intensity of banana cultivation increased a lot in particular north-west of Lake Victoria. The investment of much labour and the use of perennial plants generated surplus value. Family heads who controlled the gardens used them to attract followers.⁵² Here the kingdom of Buganda emerged in the seventeenth century.

Social and cultural dimensions of the ancient Great Lakes societies

Over the centuries, Great Lakes Bantu societies developed socio-political and cultural institutions to organize their food production systems and to give meaning to their daily life and their social and natural environment. A basic organizing principle was kinship. Between approximately 500 BC and 500 AD lineal and residential identities were created. Lineality expressed family identity and helped define the character of the settlements.⁵³ The lineal family identity was extended by the clan structure. The clan goes beyond the limits of the family enclosure and the more clearly defined lineage group and combines kinship, exogamy

⁴⁹ The Rutara language group had arisen at about AD 500. Schoenbrun (1998), p. 46. See next part of this section for more information about language communities.

⁵⁰ Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 74-79; Schoenbrun (1993a), pp. 46-50; Taylor *at all.*, (2000), p. 531.

⁵¹ Peter Robertshaw & David Taylor, “Climate Change and the Rise of Political Complexity in Western Uganda.” In: *Journal of African History*, 41 (2000), pp. 14-15; Andrew Reid, “Cattle, Identity and Genocide in the African Great Lakes Region.” In: *Archaeology International*, 4 (2000), p. 35. The two sites are also associated to the so-called “Kitara Empire” in older historical literature. See also pages 18-20 below.

⁵² Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 82-83; Schoenbrun (1993a), pp. 50-53.

⁵³ Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 95-97. Lineality or lineal descent is the direct lineage from the male (patrilineage) or female (matrilineage) line.

(members cannot marry each other), shared symbols (totems) and rules of solidarity. The ways in which clan membership is defined are vague: reference to a collective name gives, at least a formal indication of having come from a common (patri)lineal ancestor. The principle of solidarity was underlined by a “totemic” marker mostly described as a prohibition (often a wild animal or a cultivated or undomesticated plant, but also a part of a slaughtered animal or cow of a particular colour). The concrete ties were very loose, in part because clan members lived dispersed throughout the region.⁵⁴ The development of lineality facilitated modes of reckoning descent and inheritance. Roughly between 500 and 1000 AD, descent and inheritance lineality tended to a preference for patrilineality and this happened in the context of addressing the environmental and productive crises that arose in this period. These kinship structures were also the base for the emergence of (political) leadership. Initially, leaders were kin-group leaders with reciprocal obligations within their family group. A wealthy leader could attract followers and become a chief with control over land and people. Around the middle of the first millennium AD, people in the Interlacustrine Region invented territorial and hereditary elements for the institution of chiefship. The emergence of patron-client relationships can be traced back to this context. In this way, the expansion of settlements may have been organized as well as the putting into use of new lands.⁵⁵

Great Lakes Proto-Bantu speakers were very much focused on the fecundity of the land and the fertility of the family. Amidst their communities were people who possessed special powers to promote fertility and health, like “healers” and diviner-doctors. They were able to communicate with spirits, diagnose illness and foster health. The spirits were associated with specific shrines. As a matter of fact, the special capacities of “healers” to communicate with spirits and their responsibilities for fecundity and fertility was separated from the powers of the chiefs who were responsible for the welfare of their communities in a more material sense. The division of organizational power and healing practices was characteristic for the Great Lakes societies but both social institutions also cooperated to combat the tensions in the unilinear inheritance system and the environmental problems at the heart and the frontiers of the interlacustrine world. The socio-political and cultural institutions stimulated the intensification of the food production systems (by cattle herding and banana gardens) and the expansion of settlement in new, open and sparsely populated areas. The historian David Schoenbrun (1998) suggests that the “healers” may have helped to manage the new challenges to settlement by offering new interpretations of disease and health to the pioneers.⁵⁶

Birgitta Farelus (2012) refers to evidence of the close relationship between the interlacustrine clan system and migration. Migration groups became the original clans and their founding fathers became the common ancestor, although the members were not necessarily, even in the beginning, related by blood (for example, because they were followers). The original place where the founder of the group was supposed to have settled became a sacred place with a shrine, the abode of the spirits. A deceased person went to the land of the dead but his or her ghost or spirit continued to influence the world of the living. Ancestral spirits returned as a python, a crocodile or a leopard. In general, the earth in which

⁵⁴ Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa. Two Thousand Years of History* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), pp. 89-90; Schoenbrun (1998), p.97; Farelus (2012), p.85. Clan identity still exists in Interlacustrine Africa although clans are split up and disperses over large areas of the region. According to Farelus, clans should be regarded as a reference category of identification rather than a family group. See Farelus page 87, 114.

⁵⁵ Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 91, 100-105; Ehret (1988), p. 536.

⁵⁶ Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 107-113.

ancestors were buried and the shrines marking these places expressed the ritual dimension of residential and territorial identity, in particular in new settlements. Ancestral ghosts could develop into territorial spirits influencing the health and fertility of communities larger than the family or lineage and they could cover a large territory. The belief in a common ancestor and the ties with the spirits of the first ancestors was symbolically expressed in the avoidance objects or totems. Ancestors were not worshiped but honoured. Through the ancestors, clan members could communicate with the spirits and the spirits could mediate between the living and the Creator (*Ruhanga*). Acts of spirit possession and mediumship functioned often as means of contact. Peoples of the Great Lakes Region widely believed in a God as the Creator.⁵⁷

Emerging ethnic dynamics

So far, the question of the existence of ethnic groups and ethnicity in the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region is addressed in the scientific literature only peripherally. Where historians, linguists and archaeologists of this region deal with this subject - mostly briefly - their use of concepts with respect to ethnic groups and ethnicity are not very strict. Moreover, authors who elaborate more explicit on the subject emphasize the “fluidity” of African identity formation, the non-competitive co-existence of ethnicities and the complementarity of different identities including ethnicity.⁵⁸

The argument for the “fluidity” of ethnic identity formation in Africa’s ancient history synchronizes with the thesis of the anthropologist Igor Kopytoff about Sub-Sahara Africa as a frontier continent. The thesis implies not only a continuing history of the founding of new frontier communities at the fringes of established societies, but also the introduction of pre-existing conceptions of the social order that the frontiersmen and their followers bring with them. The frontier process is one of cultural self-reproduction on a regional scale. At the sub-continental level, cultural reproduction occurred through the constant interlocking, over time, of the regional frontier networks. In other words, in this way cultural principles of organization spread over Sub-Sahara Africa in general, and the Great Lakes Region in particular.⁵⁹ In such a context, there seems to be little space for the formation of specific ethnic identities although the different societies recognized each other’s different dialect or language, their different geographical and historical descent, and their different food production systems and linked lifestyles.

The historian and linguist Christopher Ehret presents a different interpretation. In his overview of the ancient history of Eastern Africa from the seventh to the eleventh century, he refers to emerging “ethnic processes”. Differences and distinctions among the Bantu societies increased. In the seventh century the mutual intelligibility of the various Bantu

⁵⁷ Farelus (2012), pp. 39, 99-102, 124, 127, 135-136, 164. See also Schoenbrun (1998), pp.197-200 and Ehret (1988), p. 637, 640.

⁵⁸ Ranger (1994), p. 24; Lonsdale (1994), “Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism.” In: Preben Kaarsholm (ed.) *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Roskilde: Roskilde University, 1994), p. 136.

Kearsley Stewart refers to the problem of inadequate use of terms with respect to ethnicity and linguistics in iron age studies in “Iron Age Ceramic Studies in Great Lakes Eastern Africa: A Critical and Historiographic Review.” In: *African Archaeological Review*, 11 (1993), pp. 21-37.

⁵⁹ Kopytoff (1987), “The Internal African Frontier: The Making of African Political Culture.” In: Igor Kopytoff (ed.), *The African Frontier. The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 33-39, 69.

languages came to an end, and by the eleventh century the process of differentiation had proceeded to such an extent that quite a number of separate languages could be distinguished. Also outward movements of Bantu speaking people contributed to “trends of gradual ethnic shift and progressive expansion of communities”.⁶⁰ Christopher Ehret’s main argument is as follows. From the history of any language can be read the history of the people who have spoken that language in the past. Language and society connect to each other. A language could exist only because there was a society to which that language belonged and whose members used it as their means of social and cultural communication. The sociolinguist Ekkehard Wolf adds that language can be used as a reliable criterion for ethnic identity in two directions: group-internal and group-external. Through their language use speakers identify themselves as members of the same group as much as they are identified by others as belonging to a different group. Wolf warns against oversimplification and refers to ethnically different groups who share the same language and patterns of language behaviour.⁶¹ In other words, the development of different languages in the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region is seen as a strong indicator of the occurrence of ethnic dynamics. The historian David Schoenbrun supports Ehret’s statement. He describes that in the sixth/seventh century AD, one of the “new” proto-languages – West-Nyanza – divided into North-Nyanza and then in the eleventh century, among others, into Rutara. North-Nyanza is the ancestral language of (Lu)Ganda, the language of the later kingdom of Buganda. Rutara is the preceding proto-language of Nyoro, the language of the later kingdom of Bunyoro.⁶² He confirms that the different Bantu-speaking societies of the Lakes region saw themselves as distinct from some neighbouring groups. They even had a specific term - *ihanga* - which meant a distant, foreign group of people. The word referred to a place where people were different, not only because of their language but also because of their way of life. Apparently, the processes of cultural interaction between the region’s different societies stimulated a sense of self-consciousness that “we might today call ethnicity”.⁶³

Then, the question may be asked if the emergence of ethnicity can be traced in more dimensions than just language and lifestyle? The relational, processual and constructivist model of ethnicity suggests to investigate to what extent public power, politics and centralized polities influenced ethnic identity formation. The next section describes processes of increasing political complexity and ethnicity in the period until about 1600 AD.

⁶⁰ Ehret (1988), pp. 626-630.

⁶¹ Christopher Ehret, “Language and History.” In: Heine, Bernd & Derek Nurse (eds.), *African Languages. An Introduction*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000), p. 272-275; H. Ekkehard Wolf, “Language and Society.” In: Heine, Bernd & Derek Nurse (eds.), *African Languages. An Introduction*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000), p. 301-302.

⁶² David L. Schoenbrun, “We Are What We Eat: Ancient Agriculture between the Great Lakes.” In: *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1993b), p 7; Schoenbrun (1998), p.46. See second last section of this article for discussion about names of (proto-)languages and names of the communities who have spoken these languages.

⁶³ Schoenbrun (1998), p. 94. The term *ihanga* today connotes a distant, foreign country. See also Farelus (2012, p. 23) who translates *ihanga* as “nationality” as is indicated in the above section “Theoretical and methodological problems.”

Pathways to centralized political authority and ethnic identity formation in the Great Lakes Region

Summarizing, several profound economic, social and cultural trends can be observed in the Great Lakes Region during the period AD 700 – 1100. At the south-western shores of Lake Victoria and in the Kivu Rift Valley and Western Lakes Region communities began to integrate cattle herding and banana production in their daily agricultural activities. Some groups moved to the Nkore grasslands with their cattle. At the north-west shores of Lake Victoria, communities concentrated on the production of bananas. There was an increasingly widespread practice of iron working. Lineality was gradually transformed to patrilineality. Clan structures became increasingly important. Chieftaincy emerged as a family transcending political institution, although organizational power and spiritual and healing practices remained separate practices. The archaeological sites of Ntusi and Bigo demonstrate a growing socio-economic and political complexity.

It is possible to distinguish the development of three regional social histories and pathways to institutionalization and centralization of political authority in the Great Lakes Region in the period between around AD 800 and 1600.⁶⁴ A short overview of these developments will be presented below with a focus on the Savanna Region (the present Western Uganda). A guiding principle is the idea that political centralization is not a simple historical given but a complex whole of multiple hierarchies – political, administrative, and religious – each with certain political tasks.⁶⁵ Political centralization developed in a turbulent social environment and in this context and the question is whether there was a more specific formation of ethnic identities than before.

The innovations in the food production systems of the societies at the Lake Victoria shores, the Kivu Rift Valley and the Western Lakes Region contributed to the increase of the productivity of labour as well as to major societal transformations. Between the ninth and sixteenth centuries AD these societies were faced with the characteristic challenges of a frontier environment. Initially, the challenge had been attracting and keeping followers. However, the increasing productivity was accompanied by an increase in density of settled environments. New organizational forms had to be invented to regulate (or to restrict) access to land. The idea of firstcomers and newcomers, patrilineality and the development of political hierarchical structures turned out to meet these challenges.⁶⁶ At the centre of the new societal dynamics in this frontier situation was the general idea of the firstcomer and the special prestige and legitimacy of this status. The principle of precedence - which ties firstcomers to latercomers to lastcomers into a chain of hierarchy – is intertwined with the legitimacy of authority. To recognize the firstcomers was to recognize their authority and special ritual position in the local and regional environment. The claims to primacy were not necessarily based on the fact that they were the very first inhabitants but that they had created “a civilized social order out of a socio-political wilderness” and that those before them were part of the savagery that had preceded civilization. The principle of the authority

⁶⁴ Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 123-126. Schoenbrun describes the regional histories of the period between AD 800-1500. Here the period is extended to around AD 1600 to include a perspective on early state formation in the sixteenth century.

⁶⁵ McIntosh (1999), pp. 16-17.

⁶⁶ Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 124, 129, 136, 140, 153, 167, 175-176, 178, 181; David Schoenbrun. “The (In)visible Roots of Bunyoro-Kitara and Buganda in the Lakes Region: AD 800-1300.” In: Susan K. McIntosh (ed.), *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 143-144.

of the firstcomers operated in many contexts, from the broadest – as in inter-ethnic relations – to the narrowest – as in the hierarchy of a hamlet.⁶⁷ These newly formulated higher and lower-status identities may have been the origin of the formation of new and more specific ethnic identities. For example, in the past of the mountainous Kivu Rift Valley, hunters and gatherers (Pygmies, bush dwellers or *batúá*) were the people who always have been there. Later on, farmers (*bahutu*) and herders (*batutsi*) acquired dominance and a higher status. In the lands to the east and north, a comparable process took place: in the regions that became known as Nkore and Nyoro farmers were called *bairú* and herders *bahuma* or *bahima*.⁶⁸ The latter are the names given by Kintu, the first man created by God, to his sons as is referred to in the myth quoted in the Prologue of this essay. In the stories and myths told at the royal courts of the kingdoms that emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth century it is said that farmers and hunters had lived here since ancient times and that herders came later and came from elsewhere. This court reinterpretation of history is an expression of the socio-political and cultural dominance of pastoralism related to elite groups and strongly influenced group identity formation with ethnic connotations existing until today. However, as is described in this sketch of the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region, historical evidence shows that farmers and herders have been living together in the world between the lakes since ancient times. Moreover, the distinction between farmers and herders, and even hunters, was still flexible and the activities could be combined in the period AD 800 and 1600. But there were also the first indications of advances and specialization in cattle breeding and herding, in particular at the southern shores of Lake Victoria. Some of the communities led their cattle into lands that were unsettled hitherto.⁶⁹

Chiefdom as a socio-political institution also changed character during the period AD 800 - 1600. As has been indicated above, societies in the Great Lakes Region initiated chieftainship together with lineality already by the middle of the first millennium AD. In the Kivu Rift Valley the turn to patrilineality opened the possibility for chiefs to achieve public authority and territorial leadership. Ultimately, some wealthy chiefs went on to lay claim to the institution of kingship. At the shores of Lake Victoria, centuries of struggles over land, labour and surplus resulted in the formation of a hereditary group of successful and wealthy leaders, a nobility. Subsequently, there arose a linkage between this group and other institutions of power.⁷⁰ As a matter of fact, a long historical process of hierarchical developments within kinship structures, the emergence of village and territorial chiefs in

⁶⁷ Kopytoff (1987), pp. 53-60.

⁶⁸ The terms *batúá*, *bahutu* and *batutsi* are linked to the contemporary ethnic groups Twa, Hutu and Tutsi referred to in academic literature with respect to Rwanda, Burundi and the eastern parts of Congo and discussions about the ethnic base of genocide in 1994 and constantly renewed conflicts rooted in the ancient history of this region. There is a fierce debate about the origins of the Hutu and Tutsi. See for a review of this debate, among others, Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers. Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2010 (reprint of Princeton University Press 2001), pp. 41-75. In the present essay, Schoenbrun's thesis is followed that pastoralism had many different centres of innovation in this part of Africa and not a single exotic (north)eastern origin. Pastoralism was not introduced from outside the interlacustrine world as is suggested in the so-called Hamites thesis. See Schoenbrun (1998), p. 79. See also Mamdani (2010), p. 51. See for the distinction between *bairú* and *bahuma/bahima* also Farelus (2012), p. 255.

⁶⁹ Schoenbrun, (1998), pp. 155-156; Kopytoff (1987), p. 55. Martin R. Doornbos nuances the statement of the complementarity of pastoralism and agriculture in his book *Not all the King's Men. Inequality as Political Instrument in Ankole, Uganda* ((1978, pp.27-38) and refers to precolonial Nkore as consisting of two separate societies.

⁷⁰ Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 136, 148, 158-159, 185.

different geographical environments, the patron-client relation between wealthy leaders and followers and the breakthrough of the idea of firstcomers and latecomers resulted in the maturing of chieftaincy into kingship. Kingships matured over time and were the products of ruptures within clan networks. The development of origin myths was part of this process. As is described in this historical sketch, this was in no way a linear evolutionary process in the sense of complex socio-political institutions evolving out of simpler forms. Besides, the institution of kingship is not yet coinciding with a kingdom. Originally, kingship was a sacred institution with symbolic and ritual tasks. Kingship is far older than organised government, even of the sort of government that is associated with the institution of chieftainship. Kingdoms did not yet exist, that is the establishment and formation of a state through conquest and domination of peripheral areas and creating an outer circle of subordinate subjects and vassal polities controlled by force and not only by symbolic means as was the case with early forms of kingship.⁷¹

The roots of ancient kingdoms and increasing ethnic identity formation

The foundation and further development of sites like Ntusi (approximately between eleventh and fifteenth century AD) and Bigo (approximately between the thirteenth and seventeenth century) mirror some major developments in the socio-political and cultural history of the Great Lakes Region and more in particular the ancient history of today's Western Uganda. On the one hand, these constructions were not the "capitals" of ancient "empires" like the "Kitara Empire" - prior to the later kingdoms that were discovered by the European travellers in the nineteenth century. They were more or less complex organized chiefdoms.⁷² On the other hand, these archaeological settlements mark a decisive phase in the trek to the central grasslands and to the North by frontiersmen and their followers.

The first settlers in the central grasslands cultivated grains and herded livestock between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. Grain farming in the savannah grasslands was the base of food security from which the settlers could focus on cattle keeping in the following centuries. They domesticated the savannah by building large settlements around prominent hills and close to permanent water resources. Two dry periods had a strong impact on the choice to focus more on cattle keeping: the first from about AD 950 to 1100 and the second from about 1200 to 1450 (with two short periods of recovery of rainfall). Drought hits agricultural production harder than livestock.⁷³ The development of the large settlement (chiefdom) of Ntusi at the beginning of the eleventh century correlates with the expansion of a mixed pastoral and agricultural economy into the grasslands south of the Katonga River. At Ntusi there is much archaeological evidence for cattle breeding as an important component

⁷¹ McIntosh (1999), p. 4; Kopytoff (1987), pp. 4, 69-70; Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa. Two Thousand Years of History* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), pp. 95; Christopher Wrigley, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), pp. 84-85 .

⁷² Peter Robertshaw & David Taylor, "Climate Change and the Rise of Political Complexity in Western Uganda." In: *Journal of African History*, 41, (2000), p. 5, 15. The authors define a chiefdom as a polity at a level intermediate between village-level and bureaucratic states. A chiefdom can integrate a population between several hundred and several thousand. See for the Kitara Empire discussion below in this section.

⁷³ Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 219-221; Robertshaw & Taylor (2000), p. 21. Incidentally, both authors nuance this proposition; David Taylor, Peter Robertshaw & R.A. Marchant, "Environmental Change and Political-Economic Upheaval in Precolonial Western Uganda." In: *The Holocene*, 10 (2000), p. 529.

of the agricultural economy.⁷⁴ About thirteen kilometres north of Ntusi is situated the site of Bigo, another place appealing to the imagination with its earthwork ramparts. At both archaeological sites there is evidence of iron-working and long-distance trade (glass beads, ivory). One of the places with which trade was conducted was Kibiro, a site on the Lake Albert shore where salt was produced since early in the second millennium AD. Another salt-producing place was Katwe on the Lake Edward shore. Salt is important for both people and cattle and control of the distribution of salt was an important factor in the establishment and development of the later kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara.⁷⁵

North of the Katonga River, population densities and settlements increased in the early centuries of the second millennium. More and more people moved to these areas that eventually became known as Bunyoro. Local leaders sought to attract followers to provide the labour needed to clear the forests in this region which was wetter than the hinterland of Ntusi and Bigo. At the same time, these leaders aimed to control agricultural labour and the production of iron and to claim the monopoly on long-distance trade. Several archaeological sites - among others: Munsa, Kibengo, Mubende Hill - bear witness to the emergence of larger polities or complex chiefdoms in the period between about AD 1350 and 1600. In the oral traditions of the Great Lakes Region and in the oral historiography of the royal courts of the later kingdoms these sites are related to a specific royal dynasty named Bacwezi. In particular, the history of the kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara revolves around three successive dynasties: the Batembuzi, the Bacwezi and the Babito. Historians generally state that the Batembuzi are a mythical group of heroes and that the Babito was a real historical dynastic clan. The case of the Bacwezi is debated because this dynasty plays a major role as *cwezi - kubándwa* in spiritual and religious traditions across the Great Lakes Region until today. In the founding myths of the kingdom of Bunyoro it is said that the Bacwezi were the royal dynasty of the "Kitara Empire" - prior to the establishment of the kingdom of Bunyoro - and covering large parts of the Great Lakes Region. The historian Christopher Wrigley states that there is some linguistic support for the claim that there once existed an "Empire of Kitara" which was located by several historians at the remains of Ntusi and Bigo. Historical linguists reconstructed a proto-language that was spoken in the regions between Lake Victoria and the Rwenzori Mountains between AD 1000 and 1400. They called this proto-language Rutara, the language of Kitara. Wrigley and most historians and archaeologists now tend to support the proposition that the Bacwezi were the leaders of strong polities (chiefdoms) whose sites later became shrines. Some archaeologists argue that there are strong indications of a military function of a number of these sites south (Bigo) and north of Katonga River and they may relate to competing polities. Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries these rivalling political entities manifested themselves through warfare.

⁷⁴ Andrew Reid, "Cattle, Identity and Genocide in the African Great Lakes Region." In: *Archaeology International*, 4 (2000), p. 35; Peter Robertshaw & David Taylor (2000), p. 14-15.

⁷⁵ Peter Robertshaw, "Archaeological Survey, Ceramic Analysis, and State Formation in Western Uganda." In: *The African Archaeological Review*, 12 (1994), p. 110; J.E.G. Sutton, "Ntusi and Bigo. Farmers, Cattle Herders and Rulers in Western Uganda, AD 1000-1500." In: *Azania. Archaeological Research in Africa*, 33,1 (1998), p. 49, 57; Peter Robertshaw, "Seeking and Keeping Power in Bunyoro-Kitara, Uganda." In: Susan K. McIntosh (ed.), *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.127, 130; Robertshaw & Taylor (2000), p. 16; Andrew Reid, "The Emergence of States in Great Lakes Africa." In: Peter Mitchell & Paul J. Lane (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology* (Print and online publication, 2013), pp. 5-6.

Climatological problems and political turmoil could have contributed to the rise and later abandonment of these centres while some survived as *cwezi* shrines.⁷⁶

Spirit possession cults – *kubándwa* - are a very old religious and very diverse practice in large parts of the Great Lakes Region. Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries spirits and the mediums who could speak to them focused on the *Cwezi*, the vanished dynasty of royal and godly descent and supposed founders of the “Kitara Empire”. It is told that they disappeared to the underworld to pave the way to the successor dynasty of the Babito. In the region that became Bunyoro, the *cwezi-kubándwa* emerged as a new, larger-scale and more structured form of spirit possession. The Bantu-term confirms the structural relation between the spirit possession cult and the *Cwezi* dynasty. The regional geography was dominated by hill-top shrines dedicated to the veneration of the various *Cwezi* deities. The priestly hierarchies and ritual practices linked to this possession cult served alternately to support the efforts of a new ruling dynasty and to organize resistance to it. Several historians now argue that the emergence of the *cwezi-kubándwa* cult represented the response of the healers and mediums to the challenges faced by the people to increasing political force, centralizing authority, and growing importance of cattle. In this context, a gradual marginalization of the position of women contributed to their increasing participation in possession cults.⁷⁷ However, the historian Shane Doyle criticizes this thesis of the meaning of the *cwezi-kubándwa* cult and he nuances the certainty with which it is stated that the cult is oppositional to political centralization and to the empowering of women.⁷⁸ These spiritual and political developments in the so-called *Cwezi* polities (semi-mythical “Kitara”) had far-reaching consequences for the economic and political structures of the region including the north-western shores of Lake Victoria. During this period the basis for the kingdoms of Bunyoro and Buganda was laid.⁷⁹

The historian David Schoenbrun argues that in this period societies were formed which were recognizable as being, for example, Rwanda, Ganda and Nyoro.⁸⁰ This process of regional identity formation is related to the processes of increasing socio-political complexity and cultural and religious renewal, in particular influenced by the migration into the savannahs. The initial prosperity of the new settlements based on the combined agricultural and pastoral activities and the more or less balanced political complexity with the religious-spiritual *cwezi-kubándwa* developed gradually into a period of instability as a result of increasing struggles between clan chiefs and increasing drought in the fifteenth century. Between about 1100 and 1600, the savannah regions where the Nyoro societies were successively established, flourished and subsequently declined became a powerful motor for socio-economic and political change for the whole Great Lakes Region. The global crisis of

⁷⁶ Farelus (2012), p. 39; Taylor *at all* (2000), p. 531; Robertshaw & Taylor (2000), pp. 4, 6, 15, 17; Robertshaw (1999), pp. 126-127, 132; Schoenbrun (1998), p. 146, 217; Sutton (1998), pp. 57, 63-64; Robertshaw (1994), pp. 127-128; Christopher Wrigley, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), p. 77.

⁷⁷ Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 112, 231-234, 235-237; Farelus (2012), pp. 35-39; Chrétien (2003), pp. 132-134; Shane Doyle, “The Cwezi-Kubandwa Debate: Gender, Hegemony and Pre-Colonial Bunyoro, Western Uganda.” In: *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 77, nr. 4 (2007), pp. 560-561.

⁷⁸ Doyle (2007), pp. 560, 575.

⁷⁹ Peter Robertshaw, “Beyond the Segmentary State: Creative and Instrumental Power in Western Uganda.” In: *Journal of World Prehistory*, 23 (2010), pp. 262, 264; Schoenbrun (1998), p. 204.

⁸⁰ Schoenbrun (1999), p. 146. The terms Ganda and Nyoro are used alternately to indicate the language or the region where the language is spoken (See Schoenbrun 1998: 23, 38, 292, 298). The prefix *Bu* usually is used to indicate the area, for example, Buganda and Bunyoro refers to the area of the Ganda and Nyoro speakers (See Farelus 2010: xxiv).

ecological and socio-political nature increased the tensions and competition between the interests of farmers and cattle-keepers which in turn stimulated searches for new lands and new relationships. Change came from internal ruptures and the creation of kingdoms appeared to be the best form of restructuring relationships between clans and territories. More and more farming communities suffered from drought and were forced to emphasize pastoralism. Pastoralist values grew in importance and the control of long-distance trade by specialized sections within a limited group of clans met the growing demand for salt by herders.⁸¹ In this context, somewhere between the late fifteenth century and the middle of the sixteenth century, the origin of the royal dynasty of the Babito and the establishment of the kingdom of Bunyoro can be dated. A Luo group led by a person named Rukidi (who became the first king of Bunyoro) and coming from north of the Victoria Nile penetrated the region and succeeded in gaining dominance. To achieve superiority, these founders of the royal dynasty not only took over the Nyoro language, but they also associated themselves with the ancient spiritual traditions of the region and in particular with the semi-mythical Bacwezi, the rulers of the Kitara polities. It was impossible for the Babito to rule without the blessing of their honoured predecessors. Moreover, they had to familiarize themselves with the values of cattle-keeping. However, the oral history about the founding of the Bunyoro kingdom by the Babito dynasty also mention the use of violence and the organization of devastating raids as far as to Nkore and Rwanda. There is evidence of increasing dominance over the Ganda region. For the first time, the outlines of a real and large-scale state emerge from the history of the Great Lakes Region.⁸²

Summarizing, the formation of a regional Nyoro identity can be characterized by a common language – Nyoro, belonging to a set of dialects named (North-)Rutara⁸³ - , an increasing dominance of cultural values related to cattle-keeping, the creation of an expansionist monarchical state, a monarchy with deep mythical roots in the ancient history of the region and founded on earlier forms of authority, clan structures and patron-client relations. The populations of the different communities in the Nyoro region must have felt the increasing pressures of the unifying political forces while, at the same time, they shared spiritual inspiration with respect to health and fecundity concentrated around numerous shrines that were ascribed to spirits linked to the Bacwezi.

Between the Nyoro and Ganda regions existed several social and cultural similarities. With respect to the social domain, besides similarities in the kinship structures and principles of (patri)lineality described above, clan structures turned out to cross the boundaries of the two regions. In particular, several clans of the Nyoro-Kitara region spread out to the Ganda region on the shores of Lake Victoria.⁸⁴ In the cultural domain of the Great Lakes societies in general, many religious, spiritual, and ritual issues and mythological stories were shared. The Nyoro region appears to be the original source of many old stories whether referring to

⁸¹ Chrétien (2000), pp. 107, 121, 145, 192-194; Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 217, 221, 228, 235.

⁸² Chrétien (2000), pp. 101-102; David Schoenbrun, "A Mask of Calm: Emotion and Founding the Kingdom of Bunyoro in the Sixteenth Century." In: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55, 3 (2013), pp. 635, 645, 653, 663-664; Schoenbrun (1998), p. 219; Farelus (2010), p. 167; John Beatty, *Bunyoro. An African Kingdom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), pp. 14-17; S.R. Karugire, *A Political History of Uganda* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1980), pp. 9, 18-19; Shane Doyle, "Bunyoro." In: Kevin Shillington (ed.), *Encyclopedia of African History*, Vol. I (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), p. 309.

⁸³ David L. Schoenbrun, "We Are What We Eat: Ancient Agriculture between the Great Lakes." In: *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1993a), p 7; Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 166-167.

⁸⁴ Carole A. Buchanan, "Perceptions of Interethnic Interaction in the East African Interior: The Kitara Complex." In: *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (1978), pp. 414-415.

religious-spiritual issues or to historical events. For example, in Nyoro, Kintu is seen as a key person (the first man in human history) in a complex whole of religious, spiritual, ritual and political domains representing important social and cultural issues in life. As such he validated social stratification (the distinction between farmers and stockbreeders) in the Nyoro society, a story that is taken over in Nkore societies. In large parts of the Great Lakes Region, Kintu is also seen as the first king of an underworld kingdom with a network of relations with members of the Bacwezi clan and as the owner of the white cow, an important symbol of kingship.⁸⁵ In Ganda, Kintu was considered to be the founder of the first family, the dynastic clan of rulers and the founder of the institution of kingship of the later kingdom of Buganda.⁸⁶

Despite the many social, cultural and historical similarities between the Nyoro and Ganda regions, also Ganda – the heartland of Buganda - apparently developed its own regional identity. The historian Christopher Wrigley contends that the cultural traditions of the two regions – in particular the mythical stories – are quite different.⁸⁷ The population spoke Ganda, belonging to a set of dialects which linguists have named North Nyanza.⁸⁸ The migration of groups of people from the environmental stress at Lake Victoria shores may have contributed to the prosperity of the established nobility in the core settlements. This wealthy nobility succeeded in strengthening its position as a socio-political and cultural category. The prosperity of the region – and of the elite in particular - was based on banana production. The wealthy clans claimed historical anteriority by presenting themselves as related to the founding clans of the region and even to Kintu. The historian Neil Kodesh studied Kintu mythology by combining historical linguistics, ethnographic writings and interviewing present-day Ganda healers at shrines. He suggests that between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries ambitious leaders inaugurated innovations that allowed for the displacement of previously territorial spirits. This process extended the territorial range of particular spirits and their earthy representatives and in this way the scale of political activities was expanded in the area that would eventually become Buganda. Moreover, the spiritual and political expansion extended also to the Nyoro region where it collided with the ambitions of the Nyoro elite clans around the Babito dynasty. One of the stories tells about a battle against Nyoro which was led by a successor king of Kintu - named Nakibinge - and who was killed on the battlefield.⁸⁹ The historian Richard Reid states that the period of the reign of this king in the early or mid-sixteenth century represents a revolution in warfare because of the replacement of wooden spears with spears topped with an iron point and the extensive use of bow and arrow. In the collective memory of the Ganda region, Nyoro was the old enemy.⁹⁰ In this context, it is noteworthy that the name “Nyoro” or “Unyoro” was used by nineteenth-century Arab traders and interpreters and referred to how Buganda

⁸⁵ Farelus (2010), pp. 155, 167, 221, 244, 261;

⁸⁶ Farelus (2010), pp. 144-145; Schoenbrun (1998), p. 207; Elliot D. Green, “Ethnicity and Nationhood in Pre-Colonial Africa: The Case of Buganda.” In: *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 16, 1 (2010), pp 5-6.

⁸⁷ Christopher Wrigley, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), pp. 41, 184.

⁸⁸ David L. Schoenbrun, “We Are What We Eat: Ancient Agriculture between the Great Lakes.” In: *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1993b), p 7; Schoenbrun (1998), pp. 166-167.

⁸⁹ Neil Kodesh, “History from the Healer's Shrine: Genre, Historical Imagination, and Early Ganda History.” In: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (2007), pp. 532-533, 535, 540, 542, 546; Schoenbrun (1998), p. 207.

⁹⁰ Richard Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda. Economy, Society and Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*. (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), pp. 5, 81, 185-186. See also John Beatty (1960, p. 16) for the Nyoro perspective of this battle.

named its northern enemies and meaning “inferior foreigners”. In Bunyoro, however, the name referred to a chief called Omunyoro. Gradually this name became a honorific title used in Bunyoro to address individuals of significance.⁹¹

In Ganda as well as in Nyoro, centralizing political authority linked to a spiritual and cultural force functioned as a binding force to the populations of the numerous communities. Moreover, political power and spiritual specialists were embedded in a rich resource of mythological stories told ever again in these communities by parents to their children, from generation to generation and contributing to the legitimization of the social and political order. Despite all social, cultural and historical similarities, also contradictions and conflicts emerged between the regions and enemy images were constituted about populations living in these regions. Apparently, this emergence of different regional and ethnic identities and enemy images could be mobilized by leading royal dynasties and put populations opposite each other in violent clashes.

Kintu and the Roots of Ethnicity in the Precolonial Great Lakes Region

Is Kintu the right person to be a guide in investigating the roots of ethnicity in the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region? That is the question. In this section, I return to some major theoretical and methodological problems of doing historical research in the ancient interlacustrine societies. In fact, there are two different scientific approaches of the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region. On the one hand, there are archaeologists, historical linguists, historians and anthropologists interested in oral traditions and languages who reconstruct a historical process out of proto-languages and a rich oral literature with little empirical historical clues and facts. On the other hand, historians and social scientists who consider this approach too speculative and refer to the colonial invention of ethnicity. In the Prologue of this article, Kintu is presented as the name giver to distinct social groups in Great Lakes societies and these names appear to be the roots of ethnic categorizations in periods that follow. The historian David Schoenbrun dates the surfacing of the names “Hutu”, “Tutsi” and “Bahima” somewhere between AD 1100 and 1500.⁹² The names “Tutsi” and “Bahima/Bahuma” reflected the gradually increasing importance of pastoralism although in reality farming and cattle-breeding were complementary activities. Birgitta Farelus discusses the etymology of the name “Bahima” in the context of stories about the mythological owners of the white cow (symbol of kingship). She states that the symbolic significance of the white cow of the Bahima does not refer to specialised pastoralism, but to socio-economic power structures with respect to iron-working and wealth in cattle. The Bahima probably descend from a specific clan who monopolized the designation for “noble herder”. The name “Bahumu” refers to “northern pastoralists”.⁹³ In the course of the history, the name got an ethnic connotation. In the context of his study of the historical developments in the Great Lakes Region between AD 800 and 1500, David Schoenbrun characterizes the Bahima as a “hierarchical ethnic category”. The Anglican missionary and early anthropologist

⁹¹ Godfrey Uzoigwe, “Banyoro.” In: *Encyclopedia of World Cultures Supplement*. 2002. *Encyclopedia.com*. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3458100018.html>. Retrieved from internet: 20-9-2015. See also Godfrey Uzoigwe, “Bunyoro-Kitara Revisited: A Reevaluation of the Decline and Diminishment of an African Kindom.” In: *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 48, no 1(2012), p.31.

⁹² Schoenbrun (19998), pp. 155-156.

⁹³ Farelus (2013), pp. 255-256. Farelus writes that the name Bahima probably derives from the word for monkey – *enkima* -, a totem animal of some clans originating from Karagwe (northern Tanzania) and Nkore. Bahuma, northern pastoralists, are the pastoralists of Bunyoro.

John Roscoe (1861-1932) working in Uganda during the colonial period calls the Bahima a tribe.⁹⁴ Although the Bahima and Bahuma are not recognized as a distinct ethnic group in the Constitution of the Republic of nowadays Uganda, the groups are considered to be subgroups of greater ethnic groups or as examples of ethno-genesis, the emergence of ethnic identities. Historical accounts and feelings of sameness are associated with common origin, ancestry, experiences but also, for example, with a common occupation like cattle keeper. It depends on what a group called itself and was named by others. In the case of the “Bahima”, the common group characteristics and the consistent use of the name developed to the ethnonym and is used until today.⁹⁵

The studies of authors like David Schoenbrun, Birgitta Farelus and several others demonstrate what historical linguistics can derive from the reconstruction of (proto-)Bantu languages. Combining the results of this scientific exercise with available archaeological, historical and anthropological data, they create a plausible image of old Bantu societies out of the mist of ancient histories. Neil Kodesh, Shane Doyle and others emphasize that oral traditions should be studied in the context in which they functioned with all the subjectivities and contradictories characterizing this type of stories.⁹⁶ The story of Kintu and the milk test with his sons demonstrates convincingly the power of naming. Without a name you don't exist.⁹⁷ The interpretation attached to the name Kahuma/Bahuma in circles of the royal dynasty of the *Babito* in the emerging kingdom of Bunyoro appeared to be a new step in the conceptualisation and identification of a distinct group. It shows that name giving is mostly also an act of social and symbolic classification. Names shape order in the social and natural environment by distinguishing between kinds or classes of phenomena. Classification is the process of ranging an infinite and complex world in an understandable and finite number of classes or categories. Social classification expresses always power relations and disparities.⁹⁸ Through the acts of name giving – the creation of numerous words for different colour patterns of cattle and for varieties of bananas - Bantu societies not only created order in a changing natural environment and the changing foundations of their subsistence economies, they also gave meaning to a gradual reconstruction of the organizational principles of their societies by inventing new hierarchical institutions like kingship and embedding these new power structures in a symbolic and mythological cultural domain. Naming can become framing and stereotyping. As has been described above, dramatic events in the lives of people like climatological changes or the encapsulation into a larger political system can contribute to a perceived threat of group identities. In a situation of growing tensions between communities or societies it happens that standardized negative

⁹⁴ Schoenbrun (1998), p. 155; J. Roscoe, “The Bahima: A Cow Tribe of Enkole in the Uganda Protectorate.” In: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 37, (1907), pp. 93-118.

⁹⁵ The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda 1995. National Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy. Third Schedule; Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (as at 15th February 2006). Third Schedule. Both documents retrieved from internet, 20-7-2014; Nixon Tasakama, *Ethnicity, The State and Dynamics of Ethno-Political Conflict in Western Uganda*. May 2013. Internet publication:

<https://nixoneac.wordpress.com/2013/05/01/ethnicity-the-state-and-the-dynamics-of-ethno-political-conflict-in-western-uganda>; See for ethno-genesis also: Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*.

Anthropological Perspectives (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 71-72.

⁹⁶ Kodesh (2007), pp. 527-528.

⁹⁷ A well-known and extraordinary example is the naming of many ethnic groups by the colonial administration which were never used by the groups themselves. Subsequently, these groups had to continue with new names while the original names never became known. Most of these names are mentioned now in the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda.

⁹⁸ Eriksen (2002), p. 60.

notions of cultural distinctiveness are created of each other. It is a process of stereotyping people and shaping ethnic boundaries. It functions as framing or manipulating the understanding of how groups of people perceive their own and others social world to mobilize them for action.⁹⁹ These are the kind of socio-cultural and political processes which may have contributed to the shaping of ethnic boundaries between the Nyoro and the Ganda and the formation of images of their different identities.

However, there are also serious limitations to this scientific approach. On the one hand, it is evident that historical linguistics has significantly contributed to the unveiling of the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region when it comes to the names of crops, animals, food production, social institutions and spiritual life. On the other hand, when it comes to the naming and identification of populations in the past the state of affairs is still obscure and very confusing. The linguist Derek Nurse summarizes the problem as follows: "Historians should be alert to the fact that when names of languages or linguistic communities are mentioned, the reference is to language and not to the people who may have spoken them unless indicated otherwise."¹⁰⁰ In contrast, most historians indeed equate "linguistic community" with a population speaking a specific language and behaving more or less according to the social and cultural norms and values expressed in that language. As is made clear in this essay, the essential foundations for applying language evidence to the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region are the systematic historical linguistic reconstructions. If such reconstructions do not exist, then scholars must build those foundations. For the interlacustrine world this kind of work began with the studies of the German linguist Carl Meinhof (1857-1944) on the Bantu languages. The studies of many other linguists and historians over the past hundred years refer to Meinhof.¹⁰¹ Incidentally, it was not Meinhof but Wilhelm Bleek (1827-1875), a German missionary in South Africa who coined the term "Bantu" to describe a large family of languages. He was also the first to design a classificatory hierarchy of African languages. Carl Meinhof was the one who created *Urbantu* (primal or ancestral Bantu), the hypothetical parent language to all contemporary Bantu languages.¹⁰² Further research of linguists build upon this idea and named it proto-Bantu languages. Meinhof worked in the context of mission and the emerging German colonial power and his scientific studies were clearly serving these institutions. Missionaries, scholars, and colonial officers all wanted to use African languages to extend European power. Meinhof saw himself as an academic researcher contributing to both colonial administration and Christian matters by designing a specific classificatory hierarchy that ordered the African people according to the languages they spoke. He believed that language could determine ethnic affiliation. According to Sara Pugach (2012), who wrote a critical review about the work of Meinhof, he and his contemporaries influenced strongly

⁹⁹ Erikson (2002), pp. 23, 68; Marie-Eve Desrosiers, "Reframing Frame Analysis. Key Contributions to Conflict Studies." In: *Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 11, no. 1 (2012), pp. 3-4.

¹⁰⁰ Derek Nurse, "The Contributions of Linguistics to the Study of History in Africa". In: *Journal of African History*, Vol. 38, nr. 3 (1997), p. 361. In a personal communication (4-9-2015) Professor Maarten Mous - Centre of Linguistics/African Languages and Cultures, Leiden University, The Netherlands – explained that it is very important to check the exact status of the used language name. Is it really a language name or the name actually means something else? For example, is the name really a glossonym (language name), a toponym (name of a geographical place), an ethnonym (the name applied to a given ethnic group), or an xenonym (a glossonym not native to this language, but deriving from a different (foreign) language).

¹⁰¹ Christopher Ehret, *History and Testimony of Languages*. California World History Library, Volume 16. (University of California Press, 2010), p. 11.

¹⁰² The term Bantu meaning "human being" or "people".

missionaries and linguists at least until the mid-twentieth century in the thinking about language and culture as instruments to group peoples as ethnic entities.¹⁰³ Terence Ranger notes that many scholars in African Studies have shown how missionaries in their urgent need to communicate with Africans made crucial decisions about which dialect to privilege, what orthography to apply and what vocabulary to regard as pure. The result was a range of new written languages. New in their idiomatic limitations, their classificatory and descriptive power, and their expansion and adoption by many people who had hitherto spoken other dialects or languages. These languages were also new in the sense of being associated with supposed intellectual, moral and even physical qualities of their speakers, and thus giving a powerful impulse to the invention of ethnicity.¹⁰⁴

With respect to the north-western part of interlacustrine ancient societies the names “Nyoro” and “Ganda” indeed refer to name giving in the nineteenth century. European linguists took over these terms from Arab-Swahili speaking traders who arrived in the region about 1840 and got acquainted with an at the time dominant kingdom of Buganda. From the Buganda perspective, the Nyoro neighbours were named “inferior foreigners” (see previous section). BuGanda is the Swahili word for “land of the Ganda” and is perhaps related to the place-name Gganda mentioned in a mythical story. Further afield in history, names like North and West Nyanza and Rutara refer to the Swahili word “nyanza” which means “lake” and “Rutara” is intended to signify “the language of Kitara”.¹⁰⁵ All names are fairly recently invented. The tendency of historians to consider these names as referring to historical peoples is indeed risky. In other words, much historical information has been lost when it comes to the naming of groups of people in the periods before the beginnings of linguistic research by European missionaries, scholars and colonial functionaries.

Another serious methodological limitation in the study of the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region is the problematic relation between history and myth. From the first encounters between Africans and Europeans and the increasing interest of the latter in the histories of the kingdoms, there was a fluctuating appreciation for the oral traditions as reliable foundations for history writing. During the final decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, the collection of traditions was the main objective. British functionalist anthropology in the 1940s and 1950s considered traditional narratives as serving mainly to validate present-day social relations. Meanwhile, the study of tradition as history was taken up in a somewhat uncritical way at Makerere University in Kampala during the late 1960s. According to the historian Christopher Wrigley one should be sceptical about the genuine historical value of oral traditions (in particular myths). Nevertheless, his conscientious dissection of oral traditions results in a fascinating book about the precolonial history of the kingdom of Buganda.¹⁰⁶ Historians like Christopher Wrigley, Carole Buchanan, Andrew Reid and several others have shown that traditions

¹⁰³ Sara Pugach, *Africa in Translation: A History of Colonial Linguistics in Germany and Beyond, 1814-1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), pp. 5, 15, 34-35, 44, 74, 78-79, 84.

¹⁰⁴ Terence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa.” In: Preben Kaarsholm (ed.) *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Roskilde: Roskilde University, (1994), p. 17.

¹⁰⁵ Christopher Wrigley, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 2-3, 76-77, 196.

¹⁰⁶ Christopher Wrigley, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 14-15, 44. Chapter 2 and 3 are in particular interesting with respect to Wrigley’s approach to oral traditions.

collected in the nineteenth and twentieth century are mainly products of the historical circumstances of the royal courts and cannot be integrated in a Western linear historical concept without a careful analysis. Archaeologists like Peter Robertshaw have repeatedly emphasized that folk traditions with respect to ancient shrines do not automatically refer to historical facts or events.

It is important to keep in mind how Jan Vansina – one of the founders of modern historical research in African traditions – defines the concept of tradition. Vansina states that most authors use the term “tradition” as a synonym for “unchanging” while in reality traditions are self-regulating processes characterized by continuity and change by “perennial rejuvenation”. They must continually change to remain alive. A remarkable characteristic of tradition is its autonomy. The peoples who carry them must have the power of self-determination. A tradition is mutilated when autonomy is lost. The colonial conquest and occupation of African communities interrupted fundamentally the ongoing processes of tradition formation by cutting of people and their traditions.¹⁰⁷

Thus, overseeing the scientific limitations of studying the ancient history of the Great Lakes Region with the methods of historical linguistics and oral tradition analyses the message is the following. The historical period of colonialism frustrates in many respects the possibilities of African people to know their social and cultural past, to further build on their cultural heritage. For academics it seems almost impossible to build up knowledge about the ancient history of Africa. On the other hand, Jan Vansina assesses David Schoenbrun’s book *A Green Place, A Good Place. Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (1998) as both a rich and convincing reconstruction of the ancient past of the region.¹⁰⁸ As is described in the present essay, Schoenbrun’s reconstruction is mainly based on historical linguistic research and to a somewhat lesser extent on oral traditions research. Despite of all limitations, research of (proto-)languages and oral traditions is valuable and rewarding, in particular in combination with the more classical historical research methods and archaeological research. The studies of Schoenbrun and other authors which are reviewed in this essay show that the findings give fascinating insights in the ancient history of the region. Semantic sources and oral traditions can reveal the thinking by the actors themselves.

Summarizing Conclusion

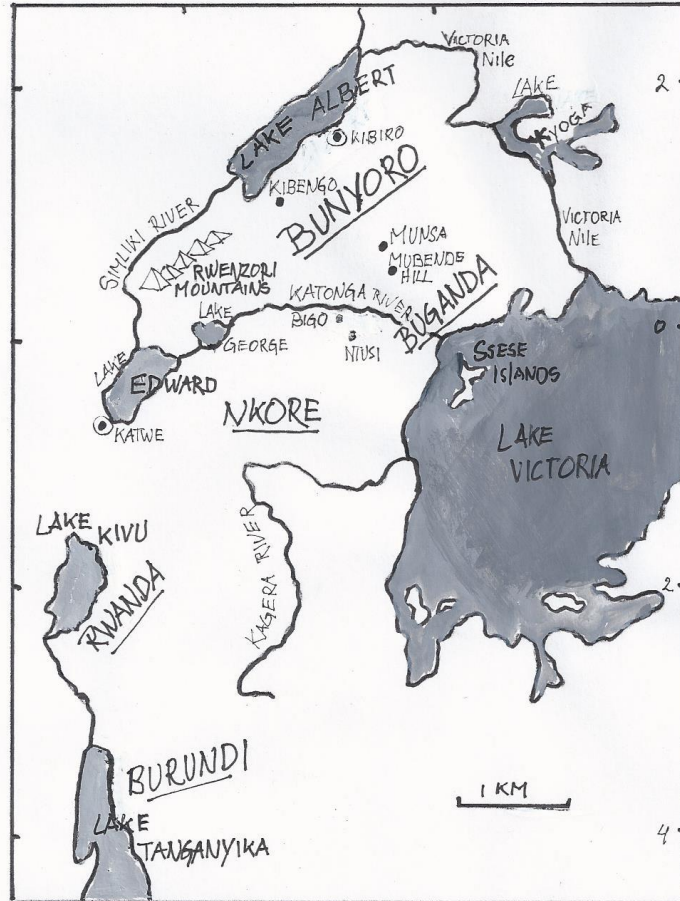
Ethnicity is not just a colonial invention. It existed in the Great Lakes Region centuries before the first Europeans came to Africa. Ethnicity is a long-term historical process characterized by continuity and change. Power relations and politics are important components in the process of ethnic identity formation. The period of approximately AD 800 – 1100 is characterized by fundamental innovations in the different food production systems, the production of iron and the emergence of chiefdoms, the increasing importance of patrilineality, extending clan structures and the healing force of shrines. In this context, the divergence of Bantu languages is a strong indicator of increasing ethnic identities. However, the numerous frontier societies of the Great Lakes Region may have increasingly imagined

¹⁰⁷ Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests. Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. xii, 7, 251-260.

¹⁰⁸ Jan Vansina, “Linguistic Evidence and Historical Reconstruction”. In: *Journal of African History*, 40 (1999), pp. 469-473.

their different socio-cultural descent and environment, but ethnicity was not yet clear-cut.¹⁰⁹ As political complexity increased in the interlacustrine world in the period after approximately AD 1100 also ethnic categorization became more visible and ethnicity got a political component. At the time of the emerging kingdoms and thereafter, ethnicity again changed fundamentally in character. But that is another story that yet has to be told.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Reid, "Past and Presentism: The 'Precolonial' and the Foreshortening of African History." In: *The Journal of African History*, 52 (2011), p.148.



GREAT LAKES REGION

LAKE VICTORIA : GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

BUNYORO : KINGDOMS

• MUNSA : ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

⊙ KATWE : SALT PRODUCTION

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