



A History of Modern Uganda

This book is the first major study in several decades to consider Uganda as a nation, from its precolonial roots to the present day. Here, Richard J. Reid examines the political, economic and social history of Uganda, providing a unique and wide-ranging examination of its turbulent and dynamic past for all those studying Uganda's place in African history and African politics.

Reid identifies and examines key points of rupture and transition in Uganda's history, emphasising dramatic political and social change in the precolonial era, especially the nineteenth century, and the continuing repercussions of these developments in the colonial and postcolonial periods. By considering the ways in which historical culture and consciousness has been ever present – in political discourse, art and literature and social relationships – Reid defines the true extent of Uganda's viable national history.

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A History of Modern Uganda

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Explanations, Apologies and Acknowledgements

When I first approached Cambridge with the idea for this book, several years ago, it seemed a relatively simple proposal. This book has proven anything but simple. I have chopped, and changed, and chopped again; I have lost count of the versions of the text and the structure that I have torn up, and of the times I have had to rethink how to incorporate *this*, at least include a mention of *that*, how best to bring out core themes. I am only too aware that this book falls short of its original pretensions. My first *mea culpa* is that while I have aspired to ‘decentre’ the history of Uganda, I have not really achieved this to my own satisfaction; there is even a dash of hypocrisy in someone who was originally (and who has long been) a historian of Buganda now calling for the need to rebalance and decentre the nation’s past. The fact is that the big southern polities *do* dominate the historical record, and it is certainly difficult to prevent them from doing so in a national context. Secondly, I have interpreted ‘modern history’ loosely in dealing with Uganda over the *longue durée*, and while the focus is on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at times I have ranged rather earlier than that. Some will disagree with this periodisation, but I hope it serves, at least, to accentuate the central themes of Uganda’s past. Thirdly, the separation by theme here is in many ways artificial; but I have striven for a ‘layered approach’ rather than a strictly linear one. Moreover, what is left out is just as important as what I’ve elected to include. In that sense, the book is not designed to completely supplant earlier historiography which in some respects may be deemed ‘outdated’ but which in others holds up remarkably well, and provides rather more detailed narrative than this book does. I am also profoundly aware that histories of nations in Africa are somewhat unfashionable things, and in many ways unedifying, too; and yet my ‘defence’ – if one were needed – is that no-one I’ve spoken to over the last few years about this project has questioned the validity of attempting to write one. The problem, rather, is that they are extremely difficult to do ‘well’. My final apology relates to the fact

that the bulk of the book was written before the 2016 elections, and something dramatic may have transpired by the time it comes out. But I hope this is largely immaterial to the overall thrust of the narrative, and the conclusions reached.

It is not enough to merely rehash political narratives, which are often in any case well-known, and reiterate the political crises and transitions which invariably pepper the lives of nations. Readers, of course, expect some of that, and their absence would fatally compromise the book itself. Histories of nations are not the same as national histories – although clearly the former can be, and often are, co-opted into the service of the latter. While I certainly have not consciously sought to produce a ‘national history’, it is nonetheless the case – and in some ways this has only become clear to me as the research and writing have progressed over several years – that I *have* sought to discern the nation as a larger concept; and that with this aim in mind, one must imagine a place – and *imagine* is no doubt the key verb – that is in fact larger than the sum of its parts.¹ E.P. Thompson once observed in relation to class:

If we stop history at a given point then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas and their institutions.²

If we substitute ‘nations’ for ‘classes’, and broaden ‘social change’ to include ongoing variations in all other spheres of human life, then we can see that something very similar holds true of national communities, and this seems to me especially apposite in the African context. What is certainly true – at least from my own perspective – is that in order for the writing of a history of Uganda to be an intellectually and politically worthwhile exercise, there must be more than simply a string of smaller narratives which eventually, tributary-like, run into one larger narrative which is the politics of colonial rule and postcolonial sovereignty. Such a book would be better presented as an annotated bibliography.

¹ I have drawn inspiration from beyond Africa, including Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford, 2002), and Christopher Duggan, *The Force of Destiny: a history of Italy since 1796* (London, 2007).

² E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1991), 10.

Instead, I have tried to search for *Uganda* as an entity and an idea which is larger than just the politics of what goes on inside the place by that name; a one-dimensional story which might give a reasonable background to a current news story, but which otherwise tells us next to nothing about what Uganda is, or why, or what it is becoming, or what it might become. I am not sure I have succeeded, but it has certainly been an interesting journey – thrilling, joyous, stressful, at times depressing and never anything other than overwhelming. Above all, Uganda is the work of Africans – people who now call themselves Ugandans – and it has deeper roots than the signing of agreements in 1900, or the designing of signs and symbols in the years that followed, important in their way though these were. I finish with another doffing of the cap to E.P. Thompson, who famously wrote of the English working class that '[i]t was present at its own making'.³ Ugandans were certainly present at theirs, and they continue to be.

Thanks are owed to a larger number of people (and institutions) than can realistically be named here, so a selection must suffice. From the outset, I must record my profound gratitude to the Leverhulme Trust whose award of research project grant in 2012 to explore historical consciousness in Uganda facilitated much of the research underpinning this book. I would also like to thank my own institution, SOAS, and in particular a former faculty dean, Professor Ian Brown, who took a punt on the project at an early stage and provided seed-corn funding. Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) provided institutional support in Kampala. The research team at Makerere University have been a joy to work with, and the significance of their input is ineffable: thanks go to Christopher Muhoozi, Pamela Khanakwa, Godfrey Asiimwe and Dixon Kamukama. Charles Twesigye, the energetic force behind the Uganda Society, has been a gracious, interested and supportive host. I must also mention Deo Katono, formerly head of the History Department at Makerere; Remigius Kigongo at the Uganda Museum for giving up his time at a crucial moment; and Ramadhan Bukenya, ever-ready at the Speke Hotel, for the 'logistical' support. In addition, I am deeply grateful to Jon Earle, Neil Kodesh, Derek Peterson, Andrew Reid, Rhiannon Stephens and Justin Willis. It would be remiss of me not to mention Professor Andrew Roberts, who originally

³ Ibid., 8.

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Explanations, Apologies and Acknowledgements

supervised my first fumbblings in Ugandan history more than twenty years ago. Finally, thank you, Anna: without you, none of it would matter.

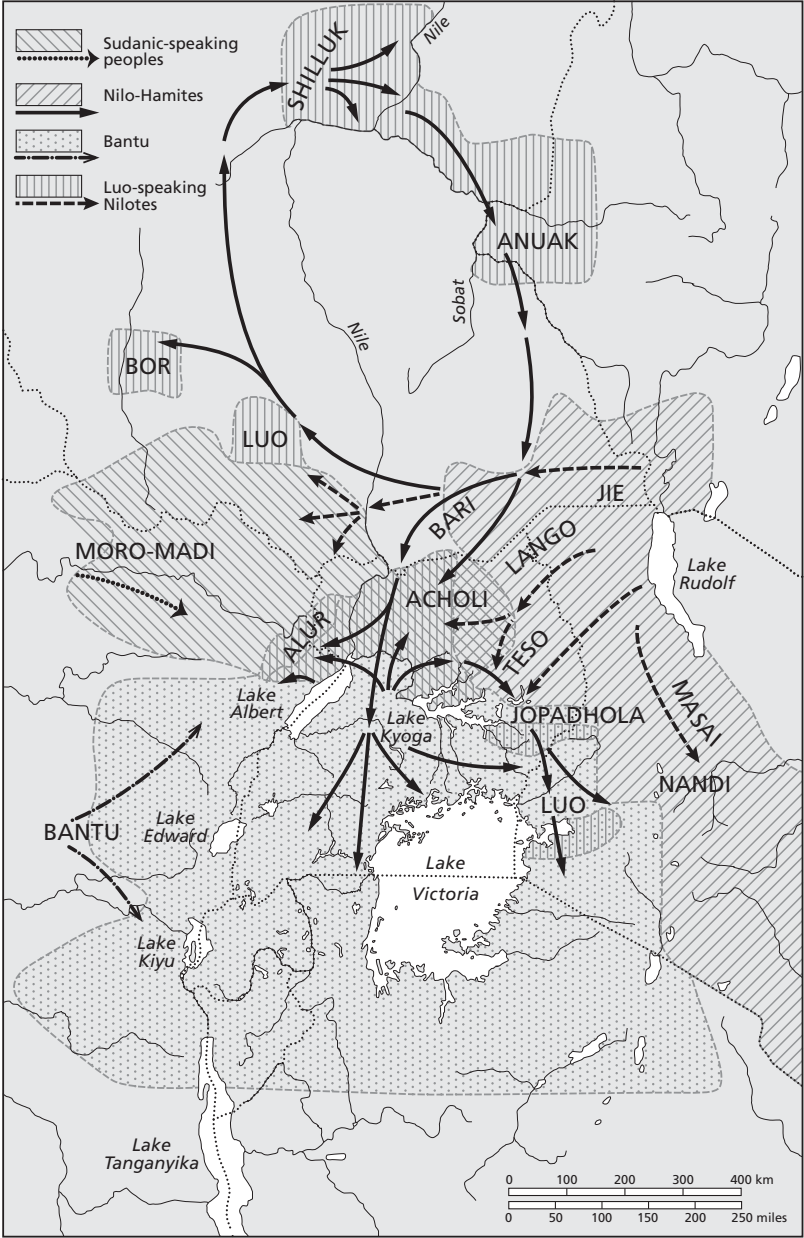
I wish to dedicate this book to my girls, May and Thea, who have derived considerable pleasure from a drum I once hurriedly grabbed at Entebbe Airport on the way home, and who made sure that the book didn't get written too quickly.

Maps

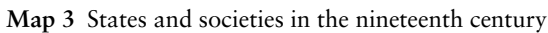
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Map 1 Physical Uganda



Map 2 Luo migrations, fifteenth to eighteenth centuries

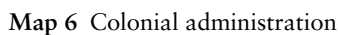




Map 4 Ethnicities in Uganda



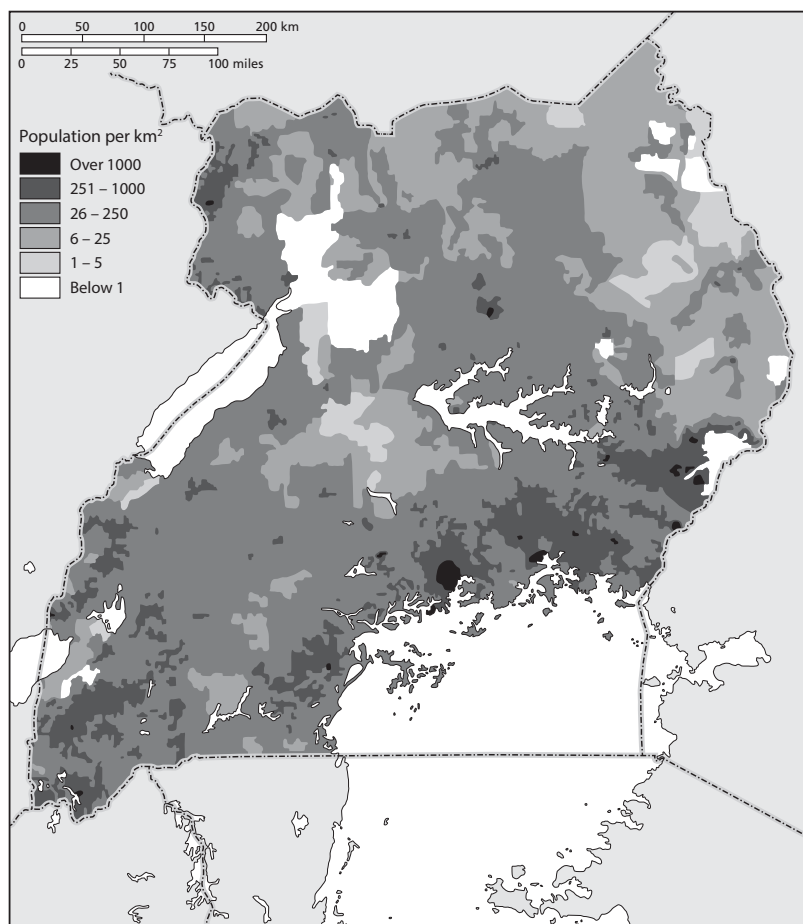
Map 5 Early colonial boundaries





Map 7 Political administration in Uganda today

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Map 8 Population density

Prologue

A View from the Museum

The Uganda Museum still feels like a haven. You leave the increasingly crushed and chaotic centre of Kampala, cross the sprawling junction at Wandegaya and head north along Kira Road. Within moments, the noise of the city recedes a little, and the road carves its way through a somewhat more suburban, even countrified, scene. For sure, the city has advanced up the road in the last few years, and construction is eating up the land: there are some embassies set off the dual carriage-way, a clinic or two, and a university – Victoria University, one of the many new institutions of higher learning spreading across Kampala and indeed across Uganda. There are office blocks in the near and middle distance, apparently largely unoccupied as yet, signifying the Ugandan government's commercial ambitions for Kampala and the nation. But between the buildings, a fairly typical Ugandan scene greets the observer: rolling hills, blanketed in lush green vegetation, separated by deep well-watered gullies. In a few hundred yards, you may be tempted to muse, there are several scenes of 'Uganda': the clamorous rush of Wandegaya; the smart office blocks and business management-focused Victoria University with its blue tinted glass façade; the green hills, offering glimpses of the 'rural' Uganda beloved of generations of travel writers. At this point the reader might expect the usual remarks about an African struggle with modernity, and the contrasts – always the contrasts! – between the romanticised rural and the dysfunctional urban. And lurking beneath it all, perhaps, a longing for *authenticity*. Yet postmodernity has dispossessed us of any belief in 'authenticity', except perhaps in our deepest recesses.

Which brings us to the Museum, located off a quiet-ish bend in the road, far enough out of the city centre to feel like something of a sanctuary. A stolid, uninspiring building, the Museum was moved here in 1954, although a collection of relics dates to 1908 and the earliest days of the British Protectorate. Within as well as without, little has changed since the 1950s. There is much of interest, to be

sure: exhibited behind glass are three-dimensional scenes of typical village life, and cross-sections of archaeological excavations; the first Luganda-language Bible; musical instruments, spears and bows, and cooking utensils – part of an extended display of ‘tribal artefacts’. A bust of Ham Mukasa – scholar, diarist, local administrator under British colonial rule – confronts the visitor near the entrance, bearing a vague resemblance to Winston Churchill, who also visited Uganda, in 1908, and famously described the place as a tropical paradise.¹ But this is not an exhibition which has undergone much redesign since independence in 1962. Culture is presented in stasis; decades of new research has failed to have much impact on the archaeological cross-sections, gazed on by countless cohorts of local schoolchildren. Even the vibrant though violent nineteenth century is largely skimmed over in favour of the arrival of missionaries, and then the Imperial British East Africa Company, at the end of it; hence the prominence of the bust of Mukasa, who represents the solidly Protestant elite which led the country out of its supposed precolonial savagery into Christian modernity and respectability – though he is, of course, very decidedly a Muganda, a denizen of the kingdom of Buganda, which was (so the Ganda say) the natural centre of ancient civilisation in the region, the partner of the British in the new civilising mission of the twentieth century, and of course the place after which Uganda was actually named.

The Uganda Museum is thus a wonderfully rich place, if understatedly. Frozen in a late colonial moment, the scent of its well-meaning white curators still lingers in the slightly stale air, and the neglect which haunts it is not untypical of many such institutions across the continent; yet this ‘house of fetishes’ – *Enyumba ya Mayembe*, as the Ganda called it in the 1900s – encapsulates the complex history, and the staggering diversity, of this young yet old nation. And the very fact of its neglect – the powerful sense of what the Museum is *not*, namely a vibrant, updated celebration of Uganda’s cultures and histories – tells a story in itself. For while history is everywhere in Uganda, there is fear and mistrust of it, not least on the part of a government which is responsible – or so the official narrative has it – for the country’s ‘recovery’ since the 1980s. And that government has recently had designs on the Uganda Museum. In early 2011, the Ugandan government announced its decision to close down the Museum and to

¹ Winston S. Churchill, *My African Journey* (London, 1908).

mothball its contents. In its place, the government proposed to build a multi-storey business complex, the 'East African Trade Centre', which would, among other things, showcase Uganda's arrival as a regional commercial hub.² Once built, a floor of the Trade Centre would be set aside for the Museum's artefacts. In the months that followed, the outcry³ was largely dismissed by officials of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), who made clear their conviction that the Museum is a luxury which attracted no revenue and produced little of any tangible value, yet which occupied prime 'real estate' on the outskirts of Kampala. It was pointed out by keener observers, of course, that the inability of the Museum to do more was undermined by the government's own meagre subsidy – 50 million Ugandan shillings (less than £12,000) in 2011–12, for example.⁴ Nonetheless, several civil society organisations took the government to court in an attempt to halt the project.⁵ It is by no means certain how the story will end, but at the time of writing, the uproar has subsided somewhat and the project (if there ever actually was one) appears to have been quietly shelved. Yet the issue encapsulates one of the core ideological strands of the NRM, which has ruled Uganda since 1986. Uganda under Museveni is the exemplar of the aggressive developmentalism – the product, at least partly, of liberal economic orthodoxy within the Western donor community – which now dominates political thinking across sub-Saharan Africa. Simply put, the notion of economic 'development' is hegemonic, and success is measured in terms of GDP growth rates. The economic patriotism of the 'new Uganda' regards history with, at best, deep suspicion, and at worst as actively inimical and antagonistic to 'development', associating it with sectarianism and 'tribalism'.

Ideas about modern development versus putatively atavistic sectarianism, the defenders of the 'old' versus the champions of the 'new': these are conflicts that reach back some way in Uganda, and in many ways lie in the very foundations of the nation itself. The NRM's apparent hostility towards the Museum is, on one level, purely a matter

² *The East African Trade Centre Project*, Ministry of Tourism, Trade and Industry Project Proposal, n.d., Kampala.

³ See, for example, Ephraim Kamuhangire, 'Don't Destroy the Museum', *New Vision* (Kampala), 10 March 2011.

⁴ 'War over Uganda Museum Rages on', *The Observer* (Kampala), 17 July 2012.

⁵ The organisations included the Historical Resources Conservation Initiative, the Cross Cultural Foundation of Uganda, the Historical Buildings Conservations Trust and Jenga Afrika.

of development economics, reflective of an antipathy towards non-profit-making activities and institutions. On another level, however, it is emblematic of a mistrust of the past and all that Uganda's troubled history supposedly represents, namely violent disunity. Nothing embodies that position more clearly than the relationship between the NRM and the kingdom of Buganda, with its centre on a hill on the other side of town from the Museum, at Mengo. Buganda's dominance of Ugandan politics – and, to an extent, economics and culture – is of considerable antiquity: it can be traced to the rise of the state to regional hegemony in the late eighteenth century. The kingdom, as many Ganda are keen to emphasise, was never conquered by the British; it *invited* the British in, and offered them partnership in pursuit of the imperial project. However the arrangement is interpreted, it formed the bedrock of the colonial state. In the decades that followed the signing of the Uganda Agreement of 1900 – the legislation which underwired the colonial order and regulated British-African relationships – the Ganda were pre-eminent, as political leaders, as economic entrepreneurs and indeed as the hosts of Uganda's physical administrative and commercial centres. They had the best schools, the best infrastructure, the bulk of economic output and the most political influence; they were also the most numerous single group in the Protectorate, by quite some way.

By the beginning of the 1950s, when ostensibly nationalist parties had begun to coalesce and as decolonisation became an ever more realistic prospect, Buganda was a problem. It was a problem for the British, as *Kabaka* (King) Edward Mutesa led the resurgence of Ganda ethnic nationalism and sought a guarantee that the kingdom's autonomous (and privileged) status would be preserved in any future independent Ugandan state. The *Kabaka* was briefly exiled to London for his troubles, between 1953 and 1955, for the British could not acquiesce to Ganda demands. When he was allowed to return, a compromise was struck. But a distinctively Ganda nationalism had now been unleashed in the ferment of late colonial rule, and this was a problem, too, for non-Ganda political leaders who wished to see a unitary state in which Buganda was brought firmly to heel. In particular, politicians from the north – where there was little of the monarchical and hierarchical tradition associated with Buganda – joined with others to found the Uganda People's Congress (UPC), bitterly opposed to both Ganda hegemony and autonomy. But Ganda ethno-nationalism, defined as it was by a strident royalism and ferocious attachment to the person (and

the institution) of the *Kabaka*, was even a problem for other Ganda – particularly Roman Catholic Ganda – who did not see the kingdom's best interests served by such a political programme. A group of them, under the leadership of Benedicto Kiwanuka, formed the Democratic Party – and the DP performed well enough in 1961 elections to form the first internal self-government. In one of the great ironies of modern Ugandan history, however, the UPC made a pact with the Ganda royalist party – the *Kabaka Yekka* (King Alone) movement – in order to marginalise their common enemy the DP, and together UPC leader Milton Obote and the *Kabaka* of Buganda took Uganda to full independence in October 1962.

Whatever mutual advantage there had been swiftly dissipated: in 1966 Obote sent soldiers to occupy the royal palace at Mengo, and Edward Mutesa just about managed to escape into exile – eventually to London, once again, where he died in what some say were suspicious circumstances in 1969. Meanwhile in 1967 Obote abnegated the constitution and proclaimed a new one, in which the 'traditional kingdoms' – Buganda and the other big southern polities, Bunyoro, Toro, Ankole and Busoga – were formally abolished. It was, Obote argued, a blow for unity against anachronistic tribalism and sectarianism. And so it remained until 1993, when the NRM government restored them – all, that is, except Ankole where the old monarchy was a rather more problematic issue (and from whence most of the NRM leadership hailed).⁶ It was an extremely popular move among the supporters of kings, not least in Buganda, whose backing Museveni needed in building the new Uganda. He certainly had it, for a while. But the constitutional amendment under which the kingdoms had been restored contained an important caveat, namely that kings (or 'cultural leaders', as they were constitutionally designated) were to stay out of politics and would be responsible for keeping politics out of culture. In time, many Ganda came to see this as unjust and oppressive, and soon came to the conclusion that Museveni was actively seeking to undermine the *Kabaka*? and the kingdom – just as Obote had done, and Idi Amin

⁶ See Martin R. Doornbos, *The Ankole Kingship Controversy: regalia galore revisited* (Kampala, 2001). The name of the kingdom which formed the basis of 'Ankole' was known as 'Nkore' in the precolonial era; 'Ankole' was the territorially expanded version under British rule, and it has been known by that name subsequently. In the account that follows, I will use 'Nkore' when referring explicitly to the precolonial state, and 'Ankole' when discussing its twentieth-century manifestation.

after him. And so it continues: tensions periodically run high between State House and Mengo, then ease, then heighten again. The kingdom remains a simmering issue at the centre of national politics – the living embodiment of a glorious past to most Ganda, and the most meaningful and relevant political entity in their lives, an incurable headache to many others.

The prolonged jostling between the government and Buganda is of course a matter of competition over precious political resources; but it is also, again, a question of history and the nation. Uganda is small – you could fit it many times into its huge westerly neighbour, the Democratic Republic of Congo – but it encompasses enormous diversity, giving rise to what I describe later in the book as political claustrophobia. And while that diversity is relatively easily celebrated before an audience of tourists – one informative publication, now in its fourth edition, presents Uganda as a kind of ‘zoo nation’, a stunning panoply of ‘tribes’ and cultures and idiosyncratic dances⁷ – it is rather more difficult to do so when it comes to governance. For diversity has been a problem for successive Ugandan regimes, particularly considering that each distinctive grouping represented locally rooted identities and histories which unless carefully managed could become actively inimical to the nation’s well-being. Buganda is perhaps the most visible and largest-scale case of this; but there are a host of others.

One of the central themes threaded through this book is a concern for the past. An odd thing to say, perhaps, given that it is a ‘modern history’. But I am not only interested in presenting a version, or versions, of events and processes; I also wish to explore how history has been used to mobilise and marginalise, how the past is continually evoked and reinterpreted, in the forging of political and cultural communities – up to and including the modern nation. And so the Uganda Museum not only occupies prime real estate; it also reflects some important ways of thinking about Uganda’s past, in its spatial arrangements, in the nervous twitches it provokes in development-hungry government, and in the understated (and long unchanged) displays of (equally unchanging) ‘tribal cultures’ positioned just beyond Ham Mukasa’s bust. It is a good place to start – and it is still a wonderfully quiet place to rest for a while.

⁷ *Peoples and Cultures of Uganda* (Kampala, 2011).