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Interethnic relations in Toro: Some issues¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper was written in Norwegian in 1967 for the symposium, organized by Fredrik Barth, that led to the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* in 1969. My paper was never submitted for publication, however, and the present text is a direct translation of the original manuscript. It explores ethnic processes in Uganda before independence, from the point of view of a group under domination, and strategies adopted by the ethnic Konzo minority vis a vis the Toro in the Bwamba area. In accordance with the doctrine of indirect rule, the British administration had given the Toro extensive freedoms to legally and politically control the entire Kingdom of Toro, including the minority Konzo and Amba groups. Early attempts among Konzo of assimilation into Toro society in order to access economic and political resources failed, largely due to Toro exclusiveness. I argue that this failure led to a further accentuation of ethnic boundaries. These processes precede the later rebellions against Toro rule, which flared up in Ruwenzori after independence. My paper brings attention to the ways in which political subordination shapes ethnic dynamics.

KEYWORDS

Political domination;
ethnicity; migration; Konzo;
colonial Uganda

The Konzo people in Uganda, which is the group that is to be the main focus of this paper, speak a Bantu language that belongs to a group the linguists have named ‘the Yira group’² or ‘Nande-Konzo cluster’.³ Those who this group of dialects are labelled Yira or Nande in eastern Congo and Konzo (Konjo) in the neighbouring parts of western Uganda. In Congo they are settled in the districts of Lubero, Butembo and Beni in the province of North Kivu and number approximately 256,000. In Uganda, they live in the area at the foot of the Ruwenzori Mountains in the district of Toro and represent one of the minority tribes in the Toro kingdom. According to the 1959 census they number 103,000 people, alongside 32,000 Ambas. The Toro, which is the dominant group, has a population of 183,000.

In this paper I shall not discuss the problems that concern the entire Nande-Konzo group as an ethnic unit.

What I shall concentrate on is the importance of ethnic affiliation for relations between the Konzo and the Toro – and partly also the Konzo and the Amba – in

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Uganda, with particular reference to Bwamba, the area at the north western side of the Ruwenzori Mountains. In this area, ethnic divides have proved particularly sharp, and I will try to explain the reasons for this. First, I will roughly depict the situation of the eighteenth century (sic!),⁴ and in turn in modern times up to 1960. I shall stop here, because it was at that time that I left the region and also because Uganda's independence⁵ created an entirely new situation, which led to armed conflict that I have not been able to study.

From a cultural-historical perspective the Konzo are a relatively new element in the region; their immigration started around 1800, and they settled in the mountainous area between the Busongora district in the south, where the concentration of Konzo is still the highest, and the northern slopes. This immigration of people from the Nande-Konzo region in Congo seems to be continuing, which is indicated by the rapid increase in the Konzo population in Ruwenzori.

The traditional tribal areas in what is today called the District and kingdom of Toro represent three clearly differentiated ecological zones. The traditional area of the Toro people covers the high plateau east of Ruwenzori. This is a fertile area at the altitude of up to 2000m above sea level. It was used for agriculture and cattle raising. The Toro have never had any permanent settlement in the mountains, which rise steeply and sharply above the plateau. However, they used the mountainous area as a retreat in cases of attack by military forces that carried out raids from Buganda and Bunyoro, and turned back to the plateau once the raiders had withdrawn. They did not settle in the forests in the Semliki valley at the north western side of Ruwenzori either. This is an area of rainforest at the altitude of 700–1000 m above sea level that has been the territory of the Amba as far back as tradition goes. Agriculture, especially cultivation of bananas and millet, and goat breeding, provided the subsistence base in this zone. Up till the immigration of Konzo, some Amba had settled on the lower slopes of the Ruwenzori mountain up towards an altitude of about 1700 m above sea level. After clashes with the first groups of Konzo who entered the area, these Amba retreated down to the valley.

When the immigration started in the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Konzo could, therefore, occupy a mountainous region which up till then had been virtually uninhabited. Here, they settled especially in the upper forest belt at the altitude of 2300–3500 m above sea level, where they grew taro, beans and different varieties of millet and engaged in goat breeding.

The three ethnic groups in what is today the north-western part of Toro were clearly regionally separated; as far as I know there were no mixed settlements. Thus, along the entire foot of the mountain there was a belt that was completely uninhabited and created a kind of a no man's land between the Konzo and Toro in the east and between the Konzo and the Amba in the west. This belt remained unsettled partly because it was very steep in most places; the most important reason, however, was that especially the Konzo and the Amba wanted to keep a certain distance between their settlements. Furthermore, the three groups differed linguistically as well: the languages Lukonzo and Rutoro are mutually incomprehensible. The Amba as a tribe encompasses two language groups (cf. Winter 1956, 4 f.). One of the languages (Rubuli-buli) is comprehensible neither to the Konzo nor to the Toro, while the other (Rubwezi) is comprehensible to the Toro but not to Konzo. In addition, there were significant differences in social and political organization. The Toro had a centralized type of political

organization and consisted of a number of small kingdoms, the most important of which is thought to be the one that later gave rise to the name of the whole district: Toro. Amba and Konzo were stateless societies based on agnatic descent systems. Finally, it should be mentioned that different dress customs and partly also clear physical differences contributed to highlighting differences between the three ethnic groups. They settled in different ecological environments in the same, large, region. As mentioned, there were no mixed settlements. Neither did the different ethnic groups intermarry. However, there was frequent contact between the three tribes. During the nineteenth century the Konzo became involved with the Toro both politically and economically, while their contact with the Amba consisted mainly of economic exchange. At that time, the Toro on the high plateau east of Ruwenzori and the Amba did not have any direct contact except for occasional raids by the Toro in the Bwamba forest. In contrast, there was considerable exchange of commodities between the Amba and the Tuku people, the latter a Toro-speaking group living in the savanna region south of Lake Albert. The groups' different ecological environments enabled each of them to provide their specific goods and/or services to the benefit of all interacting parties. The institution of the marketplace was well established in the area and marketplaces were concentrated along the borderland between the different tribes. The Konzo brought goats and beans to the marketplaces along the eastern foothill of the mountain and exchanged these for iron, mainly. At the same time, they fetched salt in Katwe just south of Ruwenzori. They could fetch this themselves from the salt lake against a fee of grain or goats. A major part of both the salt and the iron was transported over the mountains to the marketplaces on the border of the Amba area, where they got goats and bananas in exchange from the Amba. The latter depended on the Konzo for the major part of their import of iron and salt.

Particularly because of the salt trade, the Konzo were politically dependent on the Toro. They paid tribute to the local chiefs, and the Konzo who traded salt had contracts (sic!)⁶ with Toro along their route who provided shelter and protection during the transport. This service was returned in times of unrest, when Toro could seek refuge with their Konzo contacts and get food and shelter there. Furthermore, leaders of the Konzo local groups could benefit from the Toro chiefs in the plateau region when facing judicial decisions that could lead to internal political conflicts if the Konzo leaders were to make them themselves. A Toro chief could pass judgement in such cases, and the responsibility for the judgement would then rest with him, not the Konzo leaders, who thus avoided taking sides in conflicts in a manner that would otherwise split the local community.⁷

Relations across ethnic groups (sic!)⁸ could therefore be described as having served to maintain identities in that early period. The Konzo interacted with the Toro and Amba groups *qua* Konzo, and *vice versa*. The exchange of goods and services enabled each of the groups to maximize their specific values. However, it should be mentioned that due to their strategic geographical placement and their superior political organization, the Toro could to a great extent dictate their terms vis a vis the two other groups, and raids went only one way: the Konzo never undertook raids against the Toro, and the Amba didn't have the military power needed to strike back against the Toro, also given that they had no common border with Toro. This is the reason why Konzo and Amba informants often describe the Toro as oppressors already in the past century. However this

may be, the raids can to a great extent be described as an activity contributing to maintain identities.

This situation prevailed until the beginning of our century, when the British administration was established. Just before this happened, the Toro had settled in Bwamba and established chiefdoms there in order to better utilize the ivory resources of this rain-forest area. The British administration accepted the state of affairs and incorporated both Bwamba and the Ruwenzori area into the kingdom of Toro. Thus, both the Konzo and the Amba tribes were subjected to Toro local chiefs.

In the 1920s the British administration introduced a campaign for coffee growing in Bwamba, and it was such a success that a road was built to connect the region with the rest of Uganda so that the coffee could be transported to international markets. The road was opened in 1938, and created the conditions for the situation that I shall now discuss, based on my own observations from 1958 to 1960.

To exploit the potential of coffee in Bwamba as quickly as possible, the administration encouraged Toro people to move there. The land was assigned to them by local Toro chiefs in the valley or was given to them by Amba who at that time weren't short of land. Soon, the Konzo also took part in this new business, but they cultivated their coffee higher up in the mountains. Coffee wasn't grown on the Congo side of the border, and the Bwamba area proved to be better suited to coffee growing than the high plateau in Toro. Very soon, the favourable conditions led to increased Toro immigration, and also of Amba from Congo, and Konzo. The two former settled mainly in the valley. The Konzo, who came both from Congo and from the parts of Ruwenzori that were situated too high for coffee cultivation (that is more than 2000 m above sea level), received land at the lowest hillsides from their tribesmen. In this way, the belt of no man's land that until now had been the mark of the division between the areas settled by Konzo and Amba, became populated, at least where the slopes weren't too steep for cultivation. However, these areas were gradually populated as well, and Konzo immigrants began settling in the valley too; and just by the foot of the mountain along the road, more densely populated villages were formed, in which the members of all the three ethnic groups were living together,⁹ of which approximately 1500 Toro immigrants.¹⁰

This brings us to the problem of how ethnic boundaries are maintained or transgressed under such conditions. I will first discuss the factors that contribute to the maintenance of boundaries, and in turn go on to discussing the attempts of boundary transgression that were made.

The traditional identity idioms were mostly retained. Rutoro became the language used in schools, church and in the administration, and worked as *lingua franca*. The Konzo and the Amba, however, continued to speak their own languages among themselves. The physical characteristics remained the same. In the large polyethnic settlement area around the administrative and commercial centre Bundibuggo (sic!),¹¹ with about 250 households, I know of only five cases of cross-ethnic marriages. No new essential idioms appeared. The custom of dressing was the only idiom that no longer differentiated the tribes, as everyone, especially those living in the polyethnic settlement area, now dressed alike.

The Toro kept their traditionally high prestige, however. All higher chiefly positions (County- and sub-county¹²) – were held by Toro, with the exception of one *single*¹³ sub-county¹⁴ position that was occupied by a Konzo. The entire local administration

was under the control of Toro, although under the supervision of the British district administration. Funds granted by Uganda's central government were administered by *rokurato* (the district council) in Toro, in which Amba and Konzo were under-represented, so that they could not make effective claims for development initiatives in areas with predominant Konzo and Amba populations. Teachers and priests and many of the relatively wealthy tradesmen were Toro – among the latter there were no Amba or Konzo. As mentioned, Rutoro was the official written language and it was also one of the languages used in Uganda's radio.

The Toros' superior prestige, which emerged with their relatively privileged political and economic position, was reflected in behaviour that protected the identity of Toro: they behaved arrogantly towards the two other tribes and described them as 'baboons', 'primitive', 'dirty', 'promiscuous', etc. Tensions between Konzo and Amba were manifested in a similar way, though the factor of prestige did not play the same role. Both of the tribes were forced to recognize the higher prestige of Toro, but Amba, for instance, didn't want to accept such claims from the Konzo side. At the same time, it should be added that the identity-maintaining exchange of goods between the three groups, especially between the Konzo and the Amba, continued and intensified in this new situation. The marketplaces became even more important than earlier, as many of them became trade centres for cash crops.

There wasn't much that could counteract this ethnic differentiation. As far as the British administration was concerned, no tribal differences existed within the Toro district. The Amba and the Konzo were simply considered part of the population in some of Toro's counties. As mentioned, all finances were administered by the Toro Rokurato. This, however, led to the major part of the funds for economic development, for the development of schools etc., being directed to the Toro regions or to individual Toro rather than to the minority tribes, and the political control remained in the hands of the Toro.¹⁵

In this way, ethnic boundaries were made relevant and thus maintained through the distribution of scarce resources from the Toro's local government. The Toro controlled this distribution, and therefore chose to make themselves an exclusive group. Toro could not obtain any particular advantages by assimilation into Konzo or Amba society, even though they lived in Bwamba. They could obtain land via Toro chiefs, and their rights were protected by the same authorities. Exclusivity was thus maintained throughout, down to the interpersonal relational set.

In this situation, the minority tribes reacted in two ways. Either they tried to become incorporated into the Toro tribe, or, they isolated themselves and tried to achieve similar benefits through their own effort – especially economically.

Limited access to schools for Konzo and Amba inhabitants caused the formation of an elite within these ethnic groups, consisting primarily of those who were able to acquire education. They called themselves *abasomi* – 'readers', 'Christians'. Many of them had been economically successful as coffee farmers. To make the most of the advantage their education could give, members of the elite tried to achieve assimilation in Toro society. For this purpose, the majority settled in the polyethnic areas and tried to absorb Toro culture and ways of living. They talked Rutoro among themselves and used the courts of the Toro administration to solve their disputes instead of Konzo councils of elders. They dressed in suits and wore shoes and adopted the Toro way of behaviour towards their own tribesmates. On the whole, they aspired to typical white-collars jobs

in the district or local administration. However, these were frustrated attempts. The Konzo elite was not accepted by the Toro, and with a few exceptions Konzo didn't find positions in the local administration; all jobs were first offered to Toro. The Konzo and Amba who tried to get jobs in the British district administration were similarly unsuccessful. Here, they experienced that Toro clerks stopped their applications and supported the applications from other Toro instead. Due to the frustrating attempts, the conflict with the Toro gradually intensified. In addition, continued immigration led to land shortage in the area. The Amba, who had either resisted to hand over land to Toro immigrants or experienced that land was taken away from them and given to Toro immigrants, now had to come to terms with a situation in which many of their sons had to leave their fathers' villages as a result of land shortage and move to less profitable areas far away from roads and marketplaces. This was considered first and foremost a result of Toro immigration. The Konzo in the mountains were facing similar problems. Here, another factor played a part, namely that the area was suited for the cultivation of a more valuable variety of coffee.¹⁶ This led to openly expressed fear that the Toro administration would start to allocate land to Toro immigrants in this area. This had not taken place earlier, as the Toro had preferred to live in relatively flat and easily cultivable land.

Such conflicts caused further polarization between the ethnic groups and thus a firmer distinction of the boundaries between them.

As attempts to incorporate into Toro society were unsuccessful, the Konzo and Amba elites pursued other opportunities. They supported the Cooperative Department¹⁷ of the British district administration that worked to establish sales cooperatives among the coffee producers in Bwamba. Members of the minority groups thus counted on the British administration, which remained above the fray of ethnic tension in the area, to promote a more specific economic upturn that would also benefit the minority tribes. In the board of the Ruwenzori Growers' Cooperative,¹⁸ some Toro were admittedly included, both due to their expertise and because the Cooperative Department resisted the prospect of the cooperative becoming an exclusive Konzo/Amba venture. However, it was exactly the cooperative that led to further polarization between the Konzo/Amba and the Toro, as the king of Toro intervened by attempting to influence the plans for building a coffee factory in Bwamba in a way that was interpreted as an attempt to win personal economic advantage from the venture.¹⁹

Another attempt, made particularly by the Konzo elite, to overcome the barrier to maximizing Konzo values that Toro control represented, remains to be mentioned. They founded the 'Bakonjo Life History Research Ruwenzori'²⁰, an association that from the very beginning in 1957 aimed to explore the history of the tribe. However, as in many other areas of Africa, it became a predecessor to a nationalist movement on a tribal basis, whose aim was to separate the Konzo (later on also the Amba) from the kingdom of Toro. The objective was to work for the establishment of a separate District for the two tribes, which would thus be governed directly by the central government of an independent Uganda. The strategy was to provide positive prestige to a Konzo culture that until now had suffered from negative renown, given that all those who had tried, had attempted to adopt Toro culture in order to reach assimilation in Toro. The members of this association worked to make Lukonzo an official language, but at the same time, they advocated for children continuing in

the existing schools even if they were controlled by the local government in Toro. They also organized meetings where Konzo traditions were glorified and set in sharp contrast to the history of other ethnic groups. They also created a Konzo national anthem, and severely criticized everyone who tried to 'make Toro of themselves'. Such people were described as traitors to the Konzo cause. This association formed the core of the movement that led to the joint Konzo and Amba rebellion against Toro, that started in 1962 and that even at the time of writing flares up every now and again.

Conclusion

In the time before colonial rule was introduced, the ethnic boundaries in what is today's Toro were established and maintained by the fact that the different groups could exploit ecologically different areas, and ethnic identities were rewarded by a rather extensive exchange of goods and services. This also helped to highlight the cultural idioms that expressed identity differences. Therefore, the relation had many pronounced symbiotic features.

In the time after 1938, when Bwamba had become politically subjected to Toro and social and economic change was accentuated, polyethnic local communities were formed. In spite of the fact that the economic symbiosis between the three ethnic groups continued and partly was intensified through more elaborate commodity exchange, the situation that had developed facilitated the blurring of ethnic divides. The British administration officially tried to promote such a process. However, at the same time, it had given the Toro nearly free hands to control the political development in the entire Kingdom of Toro. This political control and the economic power it entailed made it especially advantageous for Toro, *at least from the short term perspective*,²¹ to make themselves exclusive, thus achieving maximum benefit from both scarce economic and political resources. The relationship between the two minority tribes towards the Toro was primarily determined by the desire to get education, which was considered the key to economic, social and political advantages. However, due to Toro resistance, the attempts of individual Konzo and Amba to obtain such advantages through incorporation into Toro society failed. This led to a further accentuation of ethnic boundaries, as the minority tribes could no longer maximize their values by adopting the cultural idioms of the Toro.

They therefore regarded themselves as compelled to resort to other solutions. The interethnic relations in the educational sector continued, in spite of pronounced accusations that Toro teachers discriminated against Konzo and Amba pupils. However, education was considered such an important means to maximize other values that schools still became crowded, even if the interethnic relations in the economic and political sectors were heading towards breakdown. Under these conditions, the minority tribes chose to give up the use of Toro as a platform for attempts to maximize their values. Instead, they turned to promoting the aspects of their *own* cultural distinctiveness with the aim of using the central government of Uganda as a platform. It resulted in an even more distinctive marking of ethnic divides, especially of those that existed between Konzo and Amba on one side and the Toro on the other.

The relations between the Konzo/Amba and the Toro are an example of ethnic affiliation becoming the most important identity criterion in a political and economic conflict.

Given that we deal with a small-scale society with face-to-face relations, where particularly the languages became clear identity markers, assimilation did not take place during the short period that these conditions persisted. In a small-scale society of this kind the 'passing'²² of individuals is impossible, in this case also because it was the elite that due to their specific qualifications had the greatest interest in 'becoming Toro'. But here, they entered into a competitive relationship with the Toro elite, a competition that particularly centred on the scarce resources in the labour market.

In the situation that I have described, it thus appears that the mechanisms that maintain boundaries, work at their strongest in places where the divides are under the heaviest attack, due to political and economic interests linked to ethnic affiliation.

It does not appear to have been cohesion-creating relationships within the Konzo-society that preserved the Konzo as a separate ethnic group *vis-à-vis* the Toro, but rather the exclusiveness of the latter. Only after all attempts at assimilation had failed, the internal mechanisms in Konzo society came into operation in a manner that strengthened the polarization between the two groups.

Notes

1. Original Norwegian title: *Inter-etniske relasjoner i Toro. Noen momenter* (Sommerfelt 1967). This manuscript is a direct translation of a paper submitted for participants in advance of the Wenner-Gren Symposium on "Ethnic Groups", organized by Fredrik Barth in Bergen, February 23rd to 26th 1967 (12 pp). The paper was not prepared for publication, and it would have been edited had the author decided to submit a finalized manuscript. In this translation, we have kept the original colloquial tone. English terms in italics are handwritten notes added to the typewritten manuscript (Marek Jakoubek (MJ)). The first translation was done by Hana Kendíková, and adjusted by MJ in consultation with the author and Tone Sommerfelt (TS).
2. In English in original (MJ).
3. In English in original (MJ).
4. Should have been: 19th century (TS).
5. Uganda gained its independence in 1962 (MJ).
6. Should have been: contacts (MJ).
7. It would take too long to elaborate on such processes here; they are simply mentioned as a type of relationship between Konzo and Toro in the 19th century. I discuss them in more detail elsewhere.
8. Should have been: 'across ethnic boundaries' or 'between ethnic groups' (MJ).
9. I disregard some Ganda and people from other ethnic groups that have settled in Bwamba as tradesmen, butchers, local administration workers, etc. A few Indians who have purchasing license for coffee and engage in trade also live in Bwama (sic).
10. The terms in italics are handwritten pencil notes in the typewritten manuscript (MJ).
11. Should have been: Bundibugyo (TS).
12. In English in original (MJ).
13. Handwritten pencil notes in the typewritten manuscript (MJ).
14. In English in original (MJ).
15. Cf. Report of the Commission of Inquiry, Uganda Legislative Council 1962; 6 ff. This report shows that 123 scholarships were awarded in Toro in 1962. 102 of them were given to the Toros and 21 to the Konzos and the Ambas even if the two minority tribes together make 136 000 against the total Toro population of 183 000. The report shows similar imbalance in the allocation of funds for the economic development (roads, schools, etc.).

16. It is *Arabica*. In the valley it is *Robusta* that is grown. The *Robusta* coffee beans are smaller and lower priced than *Arabica*.
17. In English in original (MJ).
18. In English in original (MJ).
19. I have discussed this in detail elsewhere (Sommerfelt 1962).
20. In English in original (MJ).
21. Handwritten pencil notes in the typewritten manuscript (MJ).
22. In English in original (MJ).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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