

The Ganda Clan System

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1. Introduction

This is a brief translation of a more elaborate presentation delivered in Luganda by the author at Uganda House for **Ggwangamujje NewYork/NewJersey** on 9 November 2002. The translation is in response to a request made by the President of the Association on behalf of the US-born Baganda youngsters whose understanding of the Luganda Language was too limited for them to fully comprehend the presentation. As is the case with many languages, Luganda embeds much of the Culture. Hence, describing such a fundamental element of the Ganda Culture as **the Clan System** in a foreign language becomes a rather delicate task on which we are all the same embarking.

2. What is a Clan?

In the Ganda context, a clan is a socio-family group based on a patriarchal lineage of descent. There are 53 recognised clans that constitute the system. The *group* or clan identifies itself in terms of a symbol referred to as a **totem** (*omuziro*), generally in form of a particular animal, a bird, a type of fish, a particular insect, a particular plant or mushroom. Each Muganda must necessarily *belong* to a clan, that is, to one of those **fifty-three**. The importance attached to that belonging by the Baganda can be measured through several Ganda proverbs such as: *Nnyoko abeeranga omugwiira, naakuzaala ku kika !¹* or, *Oguzzanga ku busenze, n'otoguzza ku kika !²*

Other lesser features of clan identification will be dealt with later in this text.

3. The History of the Clans

The Clans would appear to pre-date the Kingship system in Buganda. Their existence can be traced to the first known generation of kingship known as the **Tonda Kings**. This generation is supposed to have lasted from about the years 400 to about 1200 AD. King Bemba Musota was the last monarch of this first **generation** of kingship in Buganda, a country which was then known as **Muwawa**. That generation was replaced by the **second** and current generation, the **Abalasangeye**, tracing its blood relationship from King Kintu; he was the first monarch of that second generation of kingship. His Majesty Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II is therefore a

¹ *Foreign may your mother's origins be, so long as she delivers you into a clan !*

² *Rather offend your neighbourhood, than your clan !*

direct descendant King Kintu. The total sum of the clan system is generally grouped into **four** major groupings as follows:

a) On the arrival of Kintu (said to have come from the North), there were **Six** clans already established and recognized in the **geo-political and cultural State**, Buganda. These are referred to as the **Nansangwa** or the *indigenous*. These clans are: **i)** eFumbe **ii)** oLugave **iii)** eMamba **iv)** eNgeye **v)** eNjaza, **vi)** eNnyonyi

b) A group of **sixteen** clans came with King Kintu. That group is composed of the following clans: **i)** Abalangira **ii)** ekkobe **iii)** eMamba **iv)** eMbwa **v)** eMpeewo **vii)** eMpologoma **viii)** Namung'oono **ix)** eNgo **x)** eNg'enge **xi)** eNjovu **xii)** eNkejje **xiii)** eNkima **xiv)** eNtalaganya **xv)** eNvubu **xvi)** eNvuma

c) Another **eleven** clans are known to have arrived in Buganda along with King Kimera, traveling from Bunyoro. These are a mixture of clans which went into exile from Buganda during the troubled days of King Bemba Musota during the kingship **generation of Tonda**, joined by other ally clans in the course of the exile or as they traveled back. They are: **i)** oBugeme **ii)** oButiko **iii)** aKasimba **iv)** aKayozi **v)** eKibe **vi)** eMbogo **vii)** oMusu **viii)** eNgabi **ix)** eNkerebwe **x)** eNsuma **xi)** eNseenene

d) **Twenty** other clans would appear to have arrived individually from the outside of Buganda to integrate the kingdom or, to have evolved from within, as emanations of other clans for various reasons. This internal expansion of clans was partly the work of the kings of the time with the objective of asserting their authority by creating clans loyal to them. This group is composed of: **i)** aBabiito **ii)** aBasambo **iii)** aBaboobi **iv)** aKasnke **v)** eKikuba **vi)** eKinyomo **vii)** eKiwere **viii)** oLukato **ix)** eMbuzi **x)** oMutima **xi)** Nakinsige **xii)** eNdiga **xiii)** eNdiisa **xiv)** Ng'aali **xv)** eNjobe **xvi)** eNkebuka **xvii)** eNkula **xviii)** eNsunu **xix)** eNte **xx)** eNswaaswa.

4. The Structural organization of the Clans

Each clan is structured on six pillars or sub-chieftainships: **i)** **Nnyumba** (home) and its *head* , possibly a father and his immediate family, then **ii)** **Luggya** (compound or homestead) headed by a grand father leading up to other increasingly bigger groupings of families known as **iii)** Mutuba **iv)** **Lunyiriri** (lineage), **v)** **Ssiga** and **vi)** **Kasolya** (roof or top) which is the apex of the clan hierarchy, connecting up to the **Kabaka** through the **Katikkiro**. Socio-cultural governance and arbitration are exercised at each of those levels from the bottom to the top. Unsettled matters can then be pushed up to the Kabaka's arbitration through his appeals court (*Kisekwa*) composed of the respective top heads of the various clans. The most common cases at that level tend to relate to estate inheritance or replacement of a clan chief in cases of death or incapacity.

5. The elements distinguishing the clans from each other

There are four main characteristics which distinguish the clans from each other and which are respected by the members of the clan concerned: **i) The totem** (*Muziro*) the main clan symbol is generally represented by an animal, a bird, an insect, a particular plant, etc. Most of the clan symbols therefore are living things, including the *Mutima* (heart) clan. One exception to that categorisation should be mentioned. The *Lukato* (knitting needle) clan. Clan members are not expected to eat their clan symbols or hurt them. It is a taboo! The other exceptions that need to be pointed out are the two clans that do not have a clan symbol. These are the *Abalangira* (princes and princesses) clan and the *Ababiito* clan. That exception reminds us of another important feature in the system. The *Abalangira* are expected to take on their mother's clan symbol. Another taboo, common to *almost* all clans is the intermarriage between members of the same clan or the clan of their mother. **ii) Akabbiro** is another distinguishing mark among the clans. It can be considered as a supporting totem. Like the totem itself, *akabbiro* is not to be eaten by members of the clan. It is also in the form of a plant, an animal, a bird or an insect. **iii)** Each clan has a distinct drum-beat, known as **Omubala**. This is sounded or played during certain functions bringing together members of the clan and their in-laws and friends. Such occasions may relate to the installation of an heir. In the olden days of tribal wars, *omubala* would be played at the moment of a clan member's departure to or return from war. Such moments represent pride or sadness, or simply pleasure within the clan. **iv) Clan Names** are yet another feature distinguishing the clans.

The most important are the names (titles) of the clan chiefs at the top of the clan hierarchy. For instance, it is well established that the name *Mugema* automatically refers to the head of the *Nkima* (Monkey) clan; *Ssaabalangira* is perhaps one of the most distinctive clan chief names. It is the *Abalangira* clan head's name. Apart from the clan chiefs' names there are designated names common in the various clans. For example, *Sentongo* and *Namuli* are almost invariably of the *Nkima* clan; *Mukiibi*, *Namakula* and *Semakula* of *Lugave*; *Bosa* and *Nabbosa* of the *Ndiga* clan; *Sewannyana* and *Wannyana* of *Nseenene* clan, etc. However, clan names can cross over to another clan through a practice known as *okubbula*. This is when a parent decides to name his or her child after a loved relative or friend of another clan.

Then there are some names that are very important *but do not belong to any particular clan*. The most common names in this category are those relating to twins. *Naalongo* is the name given to the mother of twins; *Saalongo*, the father of twins. These two names given to parents of twins can be used both as names and as titles. The names, *Nakato* and *Kato* given respectively to the younger girl or boy of the twins; *Babirye* and *Wasswa* for the elder girl or boy respectively; *Kigongo*, given to the child that precedes the twins; *Kizza*, the one that immediately follows the twins. Another set of names that do not belong to any particular clan are those invoking the way or the period during which the child is born. *Musisi* (earthquake) is given to a child born during that period; *Kiwanuka*, a name invoking the action of sudden falling or dropping to the ground was traditionally given to a child being born unexpectedly, say during travel. There are also names such as *Mukasa* or *Kibuuka* which invoke traditional gods in the Ganda mythology. Finally,

there are names which are self-given or given by society to an individual to depict his or her character or personality, for example, Naggagga for a richly person or, Naamwatulira (outspoken) etc. Such names are generally referred to as “*amapaatiike*”

N.B. *In spite of the above distinct characteristics of the Ganda clans, the homogeneousness of the people of the geo-socio-cultural State of Buganda is ensured by the existence of a single king; a single language; a shared total sum of customs and a common reference code of conduct. Those common features are further cemented together by the fact the settlement of the people does not follow clan lineages. The clans are spread out in the kingdoms counties without any clan boundaries. Equally, the blood kinship is fairly diluted by the system of cross-clan alliances and marriages imposed by the culture.*

6. The Functions and Usefulness of the Clans and the System.

The clan system plays an important role in the social life of the Baganda. **i)** The protection of the Ganda culture is in many ways incumbent on the clans. Here, one may start with the various symbolisms attached to the *totem*, to the birth of the *twins*, the naming of the children, inheritance, etc. The general passing on of culture and tradition to the succeeding generations is a fundamental responsibility of the clans. The fear of shaming or letting down, not only the immediate family but, the whole clan is a very important motivation encouraging the individual Baganda to respect their culture. **ii)** The sustenance of the kingship is made possible by the clan system. Traditionally, each clan had several roles to play in that respect. This was the case with every function surrounding the kingship right from his enthronement, housing, transportation, feeding, clothing, the palace maintenance, etc. Naturally, some of those responsibilities continue to be played by the clans but in more or less a symbolic manner.

ii) The social security provided by the clan particularly in times of bereavement and, that heart warming sense of belonging to a large family are inestimable services. **iii)** The general discipline underlying many of the *dos* and *don'ts*, the things we must do and those we must not do are imbedded in the clan system. The key examples are the taboos surrounding the totem; but also the homage to be paid to the clan elders. For instance, final funeral rites must be performed within the clan circle, in accordance with the clan code and not simply within the immediate family. The awareness created by belonging to the clan system, lays useful basic foundations for the individual members for the *acceptance of social discipline in the larger community*.

7. The apparent inconveniences imposed by the clan system.

i) To some extent, one might argue that the existence and practice of the clan system limits the Ganda society in its expansion by making it difficult to assimilate newcomers from outside the cultural group. The full integration of people born and raised in Buganda by non-Baganda parents is limited by the difficulty to belong to a particular

clan by birth. It must however be said that there are several ways of eventually overcoming that limitation, especially when one considers that in practice *Ganda* is as much a matter of acculturation as it is of birth lineage. Without totally ignoring the difficulty, it can be said that many foreigners have thus been integrated and accepted in the Ganda society.

ii) Some people, particularly the less acculturated youths do find it difficult to accept the *taboo* forbidding intermarriage within the same clan or between one's clan and that of one's mother. Some describe the practice unfair and restrictive. We can only say that, scientists have tended to uphold this Ganda practice as healthy and biologically sound. At the same time it must be recognized that this impossibility to marry within one's clan enforces cross-clan marriages. This practice is very important in bringing about a healthy co-existence, harmonious living and peace between the clans composing the state of the Baganda. In addition, scientists tell us that the practice contributes to limiting the spread of genetic diseases.

N.B. The Clan symbols (totems) have not been translated into English, given that those to whom this paper is mainly destined or indeed their parents know the clans mentioned and can better actualize them in their original appellations. Furthermore, for some of the clan symbols, the author has not been able to find a clear-cut translation into English.

The Main printed sources used :

1. *Amannya Amaganda n'Ennono zaago* by M.B. Nsimbi, Ph.D
2. *Ennono n'Enkulaakulana ya Buganda (400 – 1971 AD)* by Bro. A.Tarcis Nsobyia
3. *Obuwangwa n'Ennono z'Abaganda* by M.Mutyaba and E.Kituuka.