The Environment, Gender, of Unequal Relations
A Historical

by Nakanyike B. Musisi

En utilisant l'exemple du Buganda, l'auteure fait l'historique du développement des relations inégales entre sexes et classes et leurs impacts sur les femmes et l'environnement.

Recently, issues of women and the environment have predominately been discussed in discourses of eco-feminism, the debt crisis, and the exploitation of the "Third World" by developed countries. The discussion has almost entirely limited itself to women in rural areas, women and resource management or the impact of structural adjustment programmes on women's lives. This article uses Buganda as a case study to argue that the development of unequal gender and class relations has historically been directly linked to the scramble for, exploitation of, and degradation of the environment in the process of state formation. The argument could be stretched to apply to uneasy, unequal North/South relations as a struggle by the North to control and exploit not only the resources of the South but also the labour to generate further resources. In this way the degradation of the environment can be seen in light of the unequal sexual, class and North/South division of labour and access to resources.

Ugandans since time immemorial have lived inseparably from nature and constantly interacted with it. Nature has provided medicines, clothing (bark cloth in the pre colonial period), game, fruits, fish and other foods, shelter in the form of thatch and mud. Nonetheless, a close examination of Buganda's history clearly indicates that the discovery of iron technology and the working of this iron into tools ushered in a new era in the relationships between men and men, women and men, one ethnic group and another, as well as human beings and nature. More specifically, it meant a struggle for control over resources and the creation of clearly marked class differentiation in the population—the rulers who owned all the land and the ruled whose labour was exploited in the process of creating wealth. For the first time, a division between owners and the dispossessed emerged. It also meant a more rigid sexual division of labour as men's labour became appropriated for state-related functions or in service of the rulers, and women's labour was relegated to the home. The ability to use iron ore set in motion the centralizing process; state structures were created and weapons were developed for use in territorial conquests in which women and domestic animals were confiscated from conquered peoples.

The geographical location that was later to become Buganda was, by the 11th and 12th centuries, inhabited by independent family units who depended on hunting and gathering and a small amount of cultivation for their subsistence (Nsimbi; Kiwanuka; Lugave). The division of labour between the sexes did not demand female exclusive labour to exploit the resources, nor male dominance and female subordination.1

By the 13th and 14th century, new crops (especially banana), domesticated animals, and innovations in agricultural implements had been introduced by outside invading clans (Speke; Miti; Gorju; Zimbe; Gomotoka). Attributed to this period is also the introduction of the art of bark-cloth making (Roscoe; Johnston). Under stable conditions, this period witnessed population growth, the development of elaborate clan private property

The discovery of ushered in a new era between men and men, one ethnic group and human beings

(*obutaka*), and the consolidation of the division of labour.

Most important, clan membership determined one's relationship to nature. This can be seen as necessary to ecological balance. An understanding between the clans was reached as to which clan would consume which products of nature. Hence, certain clans were forbidden to eat some fruits, foods, game or fish. The forbidden crops, mammals or reptiles were said to be directly related to each of the clan members that were not allowed to consume them. It was believed that failure to abide by the laws of consumption and thereby respect your clan totem would result in direct or indirect misfortune (immediately or in the future). There were twenty-six clans in total, each was forbidden to consume its own particular totem (e.g., water fish clans, elephant clan, bird clans, grasshoppers, chameleon, buffalo, mushroom, heart of any animal, etc.). Furthermore, each clan was to enter into an alliance with another crop, reptile or mammal as its second totem. The same rules applied to the second totem as for the first. This was ecologically sound consumption and protection of nature.

Clan membership also dictated the land which clan members could live on. The system was a very complicated one but strictly adhered to by clan members. Each

and the Development in Buganda

Perspective

iron technology in the relationships women and men, another, as well as and nature.

clan therefore, to distinguish its members, monopolized a set of names for both its male and female members. In one's name, one's history and relationship to nature were embedded. For example, by my Manis clan name "Nakanyike," the Baganda could easily locate my ancestral land, my diet (what I am allowed to eat in the ecological balance), whom I could shake hands with, whom I could have a sexual relationship with and possibly marry, and which animals I could talk to as relatives. (Unfortunately this centuries-old ecological wisdom is fading away with modernity). (For further discussion see Roscoe).

The consequence of all these developments was the incipient politicization of clans as fraternal interest groups with preferential patrilocality. From a gender perspective, this made changes in the family structure, necessitating polygyny as one means through which a clan could increase its numbers and hence social and political strength (Kagwa, 1901; Mair; Roscoe).

Kinship groups began excluding unrelated residents from use of resources on their *butaka* (Southwold), exerting exclusive control over clan territories and systematically restricting access to non-kin. For clan members, there was common ownership of land and domesticated animals (Fallers; cf Coontz & Henderson). A person's social authority and claims to labour and products of the environment were not necessarily determined by gender but by kinship. Kin-corporate (clan) property strengthened patriarchy and patrilocality by giving greater emphasis to identification of the corporate members. The development of clan names and identification insignia (totems) along with several rituals, especially the ritual "to hatch the children" (*okwalula abaana*) and the heir (*okusika*), clearly distinguished clan from non-clan members (Mair; Roscoe). Wives could not become members of their husbands' clans. A logical development of this trend toward consolidation of patrilineal social organization was the exertion of more control on women as child-bearers. A closer look at the ritual of "hatching the children" (Roscoe), reveals how control was exerted over women's reproductive behaviour, and the ordeals, anxiety, and threats to which non-clan women were subjected. In addition to strengthening practices related to patrilineality, preferential residence rules, the possibility of a contradiction between the roles of owner and producer appeared for the first time. The work of Kagwa (1901), Mair, Roscoe, Sacks, and several Buganda ethnographers' supports Coontz and Henderson's view that, as wives moved to their husband's residences after marriage, they became producers within a kin-corporate group in which they were not owners. At marriage, women retained membership in their natal clan and did not wholly join their husband's clan.

Between the 14th and 16th centuries, Buganda witnessed the arrival of seven more clans and an invasion associated with King Kimera (Johnston; Kagwa, 1908; Gorju; Gray; Nsimbi; Roscoe; Kiwanuka). Some sources associate the Kimera period with a persona rather than an actual person. The Kimera period can be viewed as representing a new era in Buganda's history. The period witnessed the intensification of iron-making, including production of iron hoes and spears as well as intensified agriculture, hunting, and territorial defense (Johnston; Kagwa, 1908; Gorju; Wainwright; Nsimbi; Roscoe; Kiwanuka). Clans, which by now had developed as independent political units, became depoliticized with the invading monarch curbing their political power and confiscating their lands (Wrigley, 1957; Kiwanuka). It was during this period that polygyny emerged as a political tool for the suppression of the defeated clans.

Between the 17th and 19th century, Buganda consolidated its political institutions. Territorial expansion, growth in trade, increased militarism, and the inclusion of large numbers of foreigners all meant an increased need to enter into alliances. Hundreds of women were captured during warfare as wives, concubines or maids/slaves. Warfare assured Buganda added resources both in terms of land, ivory, and cattle and other articles used to pay bride-wealth (Kagwa, 1934). Buganda also obtained women as a levy from the subdued populations. The elites' political, economic, and social control was dependent upon these plural marriages which linked the producing and non-producing classes (Fallers). Polygyny was a necessary tool in the development of Buganda's political expansion, institutions of exploitation, and stratification. Bureaucracy and clearly marked social

stratification developed out of a power struggle between clan heads and the monarchy to control land and labour.

The sexual division of labour

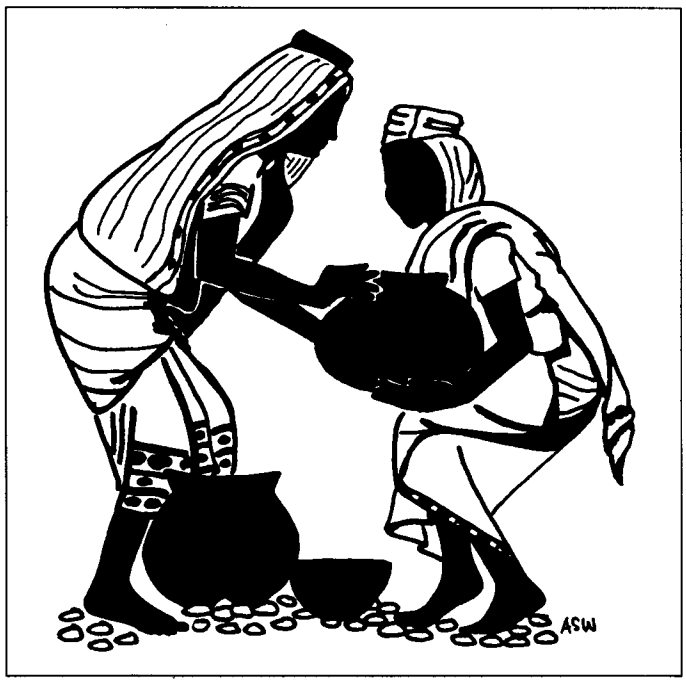
A favourable climate and fertile land were equally important parameters in shaping the sexual division of labour upon which reproduction of the Baganda state and its associated class hierarchy were based. This division of labour reflected patriarchal and class relations. The ways women participated in the production and circulation of wealth varied with their position in the class and state hierarchy. Women's labour was responsible for food while men's labour mostly produced non-agricultural goods, such as clothing. Free and slave women cultivated, processed, and prepared all food, gathered water and firewood, wove baskets and mats, cut thatch, and made vegetable salt for family consumption within the sphere of the household (Wrigley, 1946; Roscoe).

Free and slave men often worked together beyond the confines of the household. They produced bark-cloth and animal skin clothing, smelted iron, made pottery, brewed beer, tended livestock, fought in the national army, constructed buildings and roads, fished, traded, and served in the lower ranks of retainers and servants for rulers (Speke; Kagwa, 1934: 94; Mair; Nsimbi; Fallers; Roscoe).

The sexual division of labour among the peasantry was more flexible than among the aristocrats. It was not uncommon for a peasant woman to participate in the male labour and vice versa. For example, according to Roscoe, a peasant wife frequently assisted her husband in preparing building materials demanded by his chief. Peasant women also cut grass for thatching, weeded roads, and transported food to the capital for their husbands' chiefs (Roscoe).

There were activities which were not gender specific. Most of these activities involved part-time specialization. For example, both men and women acted as priests and mediums at state and local temples. However, there was a tendency to regard women, whether priestesses or mediums, to be more receptive than men to possession by spirits and gods. Once in a trance, women priestesses and mediums could dictate state policy by predicting political intrigues or other calamities. Gender was not an important consideration in the recruitment of herbal doctors, even though the term for herbal doctor, musawo, which is not coded for gender,[2] is translated in most of the literature as pertaining to men only.[3]

The hierarchical gender and class stratification that Buganda had attained by the time of Arab and European contact is reflected in consumption patterns. With respect to food consumption, for example, high protein foods, such as meat secured through hunting wild animals and fish, were regular items in the diet of the aristocrats, but rarely on peasant menus, although such foods were appropriated from the peasants (Roscoe). In peasant households, men, rather than women, enjoyed all the available high protein foods. Taboos prohibited married women from eating poultry, eggs, mutton, pork, grasshoppers. Women were even prohibited from eating certain kinds of fish (ka*sulu* and *emamba)*. If women were single, however, and living on their own (which was rarely the case), they enjoyed all the forbidden foods (Johnston; Richards, 1954; cf. Chivillard and Leacock).



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Implications of the developments on gender relations

In the clan social structure, relations to the environment remained intact, but women's position and role were defined in new ways and in fact, worsened during these centuries. First, there was a decline of women's political leadership roles, with Naku being the last recorded female ruler of Buganda (just before the Kimera period) (Gray; Wrigley, 1959). Second, to obtain land, now the private property of the King and his enclave of chiefs, peasants had to enter into client relations with a patron. Both sexes were not eligible for clientship. Only men's work was valued as a basis for giving land. Hence, women could only obtain land through a husband or some other male guardian. In this manner, women became clients of the patron's clients. For a woman to be an acceptable client of the patron's client, she, too, had to show signs of being able to fulfill certain obligations, cultivating and bearing children being most valued (Roscoe). Among the Baganda, as among many other Bantu peoples, productivity and reproductivity were so closely linked that infertility or barrenness, a major cause of divorce, was said to render a wife a positive danger "to the fruitfulness of the gardens."

Third, the development of class stratification undermined clan-based authority, attaching prestige increasingly to wealth or power-getting activities—war in particular—which were characteristic of men. As warfare was the foundation of the state and economy (Wrigley, 1957), conscription of lower clansmen for warfare, as well as for civil works projects such as roads or fences surrounding the chief's residential and administrative quarters, left responsibility for the domestic sphere increasingly with women (Wrigley, 1957; Roscoe). The narrowing of the functions of the household led simultaneously to the rein-

forcement of male authority as head of household. Fourth, the suppression of local clan autonomy took authority from the kinship domain in which women had social powers. Women's social status was thus undermined by this separation of the public and private sphere and the association of women with the domestic sphere. This was even more the case as the state succeeded in monopolizing and centralizing the enforcement of law and order, as well as labour obligations.

Lastly, in the domain of religion, processes leading to the centralization and nationalization of some gods worked against women. The new religious ideology began to reflect Buganda's political and economic pre-occupation with war and aggression (Fallers). Female gods, such as *Nnalubale,* the Great God or Mother of God of Lake Victoria; *Nagawonyi,* goddess of rain and growing crops; *Nabuzaana,* the patroness of childbearing women, were subsumed by the ascendance of male war gods such as *Nende,* the guardian of the Eastern Frontier, and *Kibuka,* the guardian of the Western Frontier. The technical division of labour associated with the gender of the emergent gods was politically imposed and supported the militaristic expansion and consolidation of the state. Like Baganda women themselves, the female gods were relegated to the private sphere (Roscoe).

The whole process of divination and traditional worship was a balancing act between the living, the dead, those to come in the future, nature, and the universe. Individuals and society at large had to live in harmony with each other and nature (Roscoe 1965). Nature could retaliate with *musisi* (earthquakes), hailstorms, floods, droughts, epidemics or pestilence if the balance was broken.

Colonialism in the context of the environment: the unholy priest

The arrival of European explorers, Christian missionaries, and finally colonialists in the 19th century were milestones in Africa's social, political, and economic institutions and ecology. Individually or as groups, these Europeans relayed information about Africa's inexhaustible natural resources in gold, ivory, diamonds, vast tracts of land, water falls, navigable rivers, and lakes, and above all human resources. The subsequent massive exportation of peoples of African decent by European slave traders to the "New World" could only be made sense of in light of Europe's greed to exploit the environment in the "New World." In a systematic way, colonialism married Africa's natural resources and human labour to the capitalist world economy.

After the Second World War, when it became uneconomical to hold on to colonies, a new era of neo-colonialism was ushered in. Neo-colonialism moved away from formal political dominance and violence to more sophisticated economic methods of exploitation. In this process, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and transnational corporations became the dominant forces. Neo-colonialism disguises policies of plunder with assurances of combatting underdevelopment in developing countries. However, it should be emphasized that the main goal is to maintain formal colonial relations with regard to the exploitation of labour and unequal distribution of the world resources.

Buganda in the colonial framework: land, labour, class, and polygyny.

Immediately after the subjugation of Buganda by the British, the first imperialistic act was the signing of the Buganda agreement (1900). This agreement not only recognized land as the most important means of labour, but as the most vital place of labour, the embodiment of natural properties essential to agricultural production (the basis of colonial economies).

Women and children were considered in the colonial establishment to "belong to men" as extensions of their power and personal property. This attitude made women invisible in the colonial discourse of the productive forces for Uganda's economic development. The improvement in agricultural knowledge and seeds gave men more power over women, children, and land. Men of means could both purchase land and implements, and pay for bride wealth for more than one wife (for productive and reproductive purposes). While men were endowed with ownership of both land and labour, women constituted the main element and source of productive forces. "[T]o stoop and dig the ground like a woman" was to many Baganda men a mark of degradation (Mengo Notes). Yet despite their central role, women were discriminated against in the process of distribution, exchange, and consumption of the material products of their labour. Men sold the cash crops, kept the monies, and made the final decisions on their use or disposal.

With the aim of maintaining class and patriarchal powers, "customary law," the myth of indirect rule[4], was invented by the colonialists and the chiefs who had a stake in unequal relations. These laws forbade women from inheriting land or property from their husbands, restricted their ownership of land and freedom of movement, sealed the sexual division of labour in favour of men, legitimized and justified polygyny and bride wealth all with the intention of exploiting women's labour (productive and reproductive) for the benefit of men.

By the 1920s, the changes effected by Christianity, British rule, and the railway had been absorbed. Big estates began to be broken up by inheritance and sale into smaller units of ownership. This move led to the rise of an agrarian middle class of land owners—a class which was formed from a double movement from above and below (Wrigley, 1964). At the same time, the passing of the law known in some circles as the Peasants Charter of 1927 by the Buganda parliament, freed peasants from obligatory labour to their landlords and required them to pay land rent instead. This move ensured that in the future, land was to gain further economic value; it could yield rent for those who possessed it. It also acquired additional value from the very high prices which had been obtained by the export crop since 1914.

In these circumstances, peasants enjoyed absolutely secure tenure and the holding passed on automatically to their heirs. The only way to gain substance, income, and status was by directly farming the land as the proceeds from it went to the cultivator and not the proprietor. In the bid for accumulation of wealth—both in terms of land and proceeds from cotton—polygyny increased (Kuczynski). Although men were willing to exploit women's labour in the growing of cotton, by the 1920s women were resisting with success a further addition to their domes-

tic load (Powesland). This women's revolt was solved with no major clash of the sexes but by the growing numbers of migrant labourers (mostly if not exclusively male) coming to Buganda during these years (Richards, 1954; Powesland). While migrant labour had the positive advantage of releasing women's labour from being exploited in cotton growing, its negative side was that it led to the gradual assumption by the Baganda men that cotton was a man's crop (Powesland).

After 1943, there was a dramatic improvement in terms of trade with coffee and cotton prices rising tremendously. People were presented with unprecedented opportunities for capital accumulation. The 1950s saw the continuing rise of world prices and increasing opportunities for accumulation of riches with the growth of towns, and an easing of opportunities in the field of commerce and other fringe enterprises such as road transportation, banking, insurance, and the processing industry (Wrigley, 45). Because of favourable world prices and the fact that cultivation for the market was the simplest form of enterprise open to all, land grabbing became the event of the day (Wrigley, 1964). Holding land and farming it became very crucial factors in deciding where one stood in the new class formation. High export prices and an individualistic system of agriculture from which non-African competitors were totally excluded combined to produce a situation in which women were to enter new forms of gender relationships. Control over women's direct and indirect labour became very crucial as multiple landowning went hand in hand with multiple wife holding (Richards, 1973). Polygyny soared in these years.

The struggle for accumulation of wealth intensified the struggle to accumulate wives. Plural wives were tied to the polygynist's capital in the most camouflaged and clandestine way that obscured their most vital role in the sustenance and lubrication of the polygynist's economic and social status. First, plural wives were necessary as a first step for plural land holding. To the polygynist a *wife* was seen as the most trusted agent of the individualist ambitious farmer. As an outsider, belonging to a different clan from that of her husband, she could not lay claim to her husband's property, yet as a *mother* of potential inheritors of her husband's property, she had to take special interest in this property. At the same time if she died, no claims on property by her relatives could be made, and on divorce, she was expected to walk away empty handed leaving all the riches she helped accumulate, children inclusive.

Second, women's labour was appropriated in a way that did not divert their roles from the traditionally accepted ones. This was done through food production. Women's food production subsidized the salaries of the numerous migrant labourers employed on a permanent basis. Third, polygyny could fulfill the most cherished ambition of most Baganda men of being the semaka, or "men of property," implying an established big family Lord (or the "Lord of the manor"). Irrespective of the number of labourers employed and dependent relatives is a persistent desire for a large number of children (Robertson; cf. Richards & Reining).

The environment and women have thus both paid a heavy toll in Buganda's political process of centralization, colonial, and neo-colonial designs and policies.

Conclusion

The relationship between women and nature must be examined from the perspective of the historic development of unequal relations between genders, groups of people, regions, and continents.

The birth of civilization saw the extraction of natural resources (iron ore) for productive purposes. At this early stage, the environment and women's roles and status began to change, laying the foundation for future changes. This process was cemented by increasingly unequal gender relations and social stratification. The unequal access to and distribution of resources also led to the development of the state. The advent of colonialism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, along with the further introduction of new productive implements, new seeds, new knowledge, and new colonial policies, made the demand and scramble for women's labour and the environment inevitable. The position of women and the environment was finally determined as subservient to the needs of the colonial state and men.

A historical orientation is essential to the developing discourse on women and the environment. The Buganda case, which is not unique, illustrates that colonial and neo-colonial policies and their impact on the environment have a long history. This history is part of the origins of modern civilization.

Policies of the World Bank and its brother, the IMF structural adjustment programs, are the end product of this long historic development. It should be emphasized that the end result of this process has been to further disadvantage women, the environment, and men of lower classes.

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[1]For a full discussion on women and state formation see N. B. Musisi Signs 16 (4) 1991.

[2]To indicate the gender of a herbal doctor, the word *musaiia* (male) or *mukazi* (female) must precede the terms *musawo*.

[3]See for example Mair's and Roscoe's (1965) chapters on religion. After mentioning the doctor or healer they proceed to use "he" in describing this person's activities, completely ignoring the evidence that was before them.

[4]I call it a "myth" because, prior to this time people's customs varied from situation to situation and were not static.

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JANCIS M. ANDREWS

Jancis' Extra-Rich Dessert

A carpenter ant has climbed my kitchen counter
eager to whoop it up with my grasshopper pie.
Such a glittering, ebony body. Such a big, black,
helmetted head. Darth Vader
on six hydropole legs.
I truly regret having to kill him
in order to discourage his relatives.
But in death I give him
what I denied in life,
and for his final resting place, tuck him
into the dark chocolate crumb crust
which soon I will serve
to the female guest who asked down her nose
My dear, whatever do you housewives do
to amuse yourselves
all day long?

Jancis M. Andrews lives in Vancouver and has had her poetry published in numerous magazines. Her collection of short stories, Rapunzel, Rapunzel, Let Down Your Hair *was published by CaCaNaDaDa Press in 1992.*