

1991

"Okukkera ng'omuzungu" : to talk  
nonsense like a Whiteman: the use of  
proverbs in Luganda historical writing

---

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/42107>

*Downloaded from DSpace Repository, DSpace Institution's institutional repository*

**"OKUKKERA NG'OMUZUNGU"  
-- TO TALK NONSENSE LIKE A WHITEMAN: THE USE  
OF PROVERBS IN LUGANDA HISTORICAL WRITING**

*By John A. Rowe*

**AH Number 14 (1991)**

*Copyright 1991 by the author.*

This paper was presented at a November 1989 Workshop on Translation, held at Boston University, as part of the project on "African Expressions of the Colonial Experience."

Publication of this paper was made possible by an interpretive research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

**Boston, MA 02215 USA**

**African Studies Center  
Boston University  
270 Bay State Road**

"OKUKKERA NG'OMUZUNGU"

— TO TALK NONSENSE LIKE A WHITEMAN:<sup>1</sup>

THE USE OF PROVERBS IN LUGANDA HISTORICAL WRITING

*By John A. Rowe*

*Northwestern University*

Luganda historical writing is, for the most part, quite direct and unsubtle. That is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing to this translator who finds himself working with factual statements in a simple past tense without the extra burden of value judgements or subjunctive might-have-beens. Take, for example, the following fairly typical section from Apolo Kagwa's *Basekabaka* (The Kings of Buganda):<sup>2</sup>

[The Kabaka returned from Natebe suffering from] a swelling on the thigh but he soon recovered. Upon reaching Mengo, he sent out Mandwambi Namutwe to raid Busoga. He then created the Kiwuliriza chieftaincy to which he appointed me, Apolo Kagwa, who wrote this book. After that the Kabaka went to Kijabijo of Nambogo where he plundered a lot of cattle. . . .

This same lack of subtlety characterizes Ganda oral evidence, beginning with the answer to the very first question asked:

"Omwami gy'ali?" (Is the man of the house at home?)

"Gy'ali" or "Taliyo" (He is, or he is not)

---

<sup>1</sup> The full proverb is: "Okekera ng'omuzungu: ndiyo; nti wabuna nsi??" (you talk nonsense like a whiteman, constantly saying "ndiyo"; are you all over the place?) Ndiyo means "yes" in Kiswahili, but "I am over there" in Luganda. See Ferdinand Walser, *Luganda Proverbs* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1982), # 3642.

<sup>2</sup> Apolo Kagwa, *Basekabaka be Buganda* (Kampala, 1953), 143.

I never encountered anything like the English countryman's equivocation reported by Honor Tracy in her book Heart of England.<sup>3</sup>

Is your wife at home today?

Well, mum, I shouldn't think but what she might be

Nor does one find in Luganda the double negative typical of much English writing (as in the next sentence). But that does not mean that Luganda writing style is without interest or color. Even in oral exchanges, when an elderly Muganda informant wishes to inject some element of drama into an otherwise dry historical narrative, he asks a rhetorical question. For example, Paulo Kibi, relating the experience of ivory hunters like himself in the Mabira Forest in the 1890s, said "we went to war against the elephant; before we set out we would smoke bhang" followed immediately by "have you ever seen an elephant?" (Unspoken — if you have, you know what a huge and formidable adversary he is)<sup>4</sup>

### Proverbs

Both oral informants and Ganda memoir writers make frequent use of proverbs. And this is where subtlety enters in ways that are often deeply puzzling to a translator. To begin with, there are layers of meaning in many proverbs; secondly, and even more frustrating for the non-Muganda, the entire proverb is seldom presented--the first phrase is usually deemed sufficient to signal the rest. For example:

The treasurer (Omuwanika) of the Buganda kingdom under the British indirect rule built a large and impressive two-storied house in Mengo before the first world war. He named the house "kabugo Kakadde", which literally means "The Old Barkcloth". Why, I wanted to know, would an important man give such an apparently demeaning name to his residence? (He was certainly not known for his modesty) I was told that the name came from the proverb:

"Kabugo Kakadde, tekabulamu nsekere"

Which literally means "an old barkcloth, you can't get rid of the lice in it." I found this less than enlightening--surely he wasn't

---

<sup>3</sup> Honor Tracy, *The Heart of England* (London, 1983), 120.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Paulo Kibi at Namanve, 17 February 1969.

proclaiming to the world that his house was infested! It took a visit to the noted Luganda language expert, Michael Nsimbi,<sup>5</sup> to reveal the hidden meaning: just as one can't fail to find lice in an old barkcloth, so one can't fail to find money in the pockets of a great and wealthy man, i.e. the treasurer of Buganda. How is that for subtlety? It was certainly too subtle for the British colonial authorities, who waited two decades before demanding the first treasury audit which resulted in the forced retirement of Omulamuzi. Clearly they were as unaware as I was of the meaning of "Kabugo Kakadde House".

Luganda historical writings are peppered with proverbs, usually rendered in their abbreviated form. Some of the more famous or obvious proverbs present no problems for the translator, as in the account by Ham Mukasa of Kabaka Mutesa's interest in the imported goods and ideas that came with trade from the east African coast (in *Simuda Nyuma*, vol. I).<sup>6</sup> Proclaiming his welcome for these outsiders and their ideas, Kabaka Mutesa, according to Ham Mukasa, made use of the Luganda proverb:

"Atanyita, yatenda nyina okufumba"

(The child who has not traveled praises his mother's cooking [knowing no better])

The Baganda chiefs, who were concerned about the growing political influence of foreigners at court, replied with their own proverb:

"Omugenyi omuyite agenda avunja"

(The guest whom you invite comes eagerly parting the grass [but stays too long and causes mischief])

Later on in 1880, after the Kabaka had contracted venereal disease,<sup>7</sup> the missionary Alexander Mackay suggested he might be cured if he went to England to

---

<sup>5</sup> M. B. Nsimbi, *Amannya Amaganda N'ennono Zaago* (Kampala, 1956) "Ganda Names and Their Origins"

<sup>6</sup> Ham Mukasa, *Simuda Nyuma: Ebiro bya Mutesa* (London: SPCK, 1938), 49-50. ("Do Not Go Back: The Reign of Mutesa")

<sup>7</sup> B.M. Zimbe, *Buganda ne Kabaka* (Mengo: Gambuze Press, 1939), 62.

be treated there by specialists. According to Ham Mukasa, the leading chiefs became alarmed and protested against the idea, saying:

To whom will you leave control of the land? You have not previously gone to Busoga or Bunyoro [neighboring African states]. Those kings of Europe sent Speke and Stanley and Grant, all peasants [bakopi], but you yourself would go to a fellow monarch who merely sends messengers? How worried we are, and you yourself know why, for you surpass us in understanding.

Ham Mukasa goes on to describe how the debate then naturally turned to the use of proverbs to strengthen the chiefs' argument:

And the Sekibobo [an important chief and counselor] responded, "Oh, lord, you surely know this: what do they call the termite hill when the queen termite leaves it? Do they not call it abandoned, from which termites no longer fly? So the Kabaka answered, "The Sekibobo's proverb is a good one, but the queen termite has not gone, surely the queen mother [mother of King Mutesa] is the queen termite who gives birth to the termites. How is it then that you fear the termite hill will become deserted?" They countered with "the queen termite who remains alone, with no termite to guard her..." Then the Kabaka said, "all right, we will leave it for now, and return to it another time.

Even without knowledge of the specific termite proverbs involved,<sup>8</sup> the translator can understand the logic of the argument and value the insight Ham Mukasa provides into Ganda culture.

Perhaps the most famous and least difficult proverb in Luganda is one that Ham Mukasa used as the name of his house ('Akwata Empola') which he built after he had acquired almost one hundred square miles of private estates. "Akwata empola atuuka wala" means "he who takes things slowly reaches far". The word 'akwata' means literally to take or grasp (rather than to travel or go), and Ham Mukasa had certainly distinguished himself by grasping or taking hold of every bit of land that he could get his hands on.

Proverbs were encoded bits of wisdom, and occasionally humor, which were instantly meaningful to Baganda listeners. They packed a punch, were rhetorically effective, and were used in debate much the way modern lawyers use legal precedent. In the above quoted exchange between Kabaka Mutesa and the chiefs who were trying to dissuade him from going to Europe, it is evident that even a man as powerful as the king felt the need to respond to a proverb rather than

---

<sup>8</sup> Walser, *Luganda Proverbs*, #2035 cites the following: "Kabaka nnamunswa: alya ku nswa ze" (the King is like the Queen Termite: she lives on her subjects).

ignore its message. The most effective way to respond was almost always with another proverb. An appropriate response to the "kwata mpola" proverb which counsels patience might be the "lindako" proverb which calls for prompt action: "Lindako, afumita mukira"—he who says 'wait a little longer' [until the whole animal appears] spears the tail.

Ham Mukasa not only reported the use of proverbs by those historic Baganda figures about whom he was writing, he also used proverbs himself to give force to his own arguments. In the opening pages of *Simuda Nyuma*,<sup>9</sup> Ham sets out his "whig view" of Buganda history in the following terms:

Each of you who reads this book, listen to our Luganda proverb,  
"Emirembe engalo" (the generations of the fingers).

As if pitying the puzzled translator, the author goes on in the text to "explain" the proverb:

The meaning of the proverb is this — that each generation which comes surpasses the earlier one in wisdom, because it progresses. So you, Muganda, do you not know that the people who were born in the reign of Suna surpassed those born under Kamanya? And those born under Mukabya surpassed the ones born under Suna?

Fortunately for the translator who may still be waiting for the penny to drop, the full version of the proverb is available in Father Walser's remarkable collection of 5441 Luganda proverbs<sup>10</sup> (published by Dietrich Reimer, Berlin, 1982), where it appears as number 2761:

"Mirembe ngalo: buli oguddawo gukira gunnaagwo". The times are like the fingers, each subsequent one is different (longer or shorter) from its neighbor.

which is not *exactly* what Ham Mukasa said. Ham's interpretation is that each finger is longer than the preceding, beginning one supposes with the little finger. It works for the first three, but the shorter index finger suggests that progress is not inevitable.

Even with the help of Walser, it is not always possible to make sense of some of the proverbs appearing in Mukasa's historical account. One that puzzled me:

"Kiwotokatekyala: omukalo gw'embogo"

---

<sup>9</sup> Ham Mukasa, *Simuda Nyuma*, pp. 5-6 of introduction.

<sup>10</sup> Walser, *Luganda Proverbs*.

— What shrivels up, does not grow: dried buffalo meat under the armpit.

Any suggestions? the context in Ham Mukasa's memoirs is not particularly helpful:<sup>11</sup>

We drank and the prince told Kabaka Mwanga he should shave his beard because it was not polite to give people beer in which you have dipped your beard. The Kabaka replied that he used to do so but he just made a mistake. Kigange then told his son (the prince) that he had drunk from cups which Europeans had drunk, getting their beards wet. He told him (the prince) not to quarrel with Mwanga. The prince answered that the Europeans never give what they had drunk from, instead they give each individual his own cup. We all laughed saying the proverb, which states "what never increases — dried buffalo meat under the armpit," had come true.

This one had stumped me when I presented this paper to the Boston University seminar on "The Translation of Words and Images" in December 1989. But the following summer I met the honorable Apollo Kironde (former minister in the Uganda government and grandson of the eminent Muganda historian Sir Apollo Kagwa) at a similar seminar at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London. Mr. Kironde explained the significance of the "dried buffalo meat under the armpit" as follows: The buffalo is seen as a huge and dangerous animal, its power similar to that of the Kabaka of Buganda. But when hunters have managed to bring it down, its meat is cut up and dried and even the most timid of persons can be seen carrying some of the dried meat tucked under an arm. Thus, with Mwanga — formerly on the throne of Buganda, as feared as the buffalo, but now in exile and no better than ordinary humble people.

Whenever one comes across one of these difficult cases it is possible to take comfort in Walser's preface to his collection of proverbs in which he declares that his book contains "proverbs, proverbial expressions, comparisons and Luganda idioms with short explanations, which even to the average Muganda are often as mysterious as the proverbs or idioms themselves."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, as windows — however opaque — into the feelings and thought processes of the Baganda who had yet to encounter modernity in the form of missionary education, proverbs are, as Walser says, "the result of seasoned experience and concentrated wisdom, handed down from past ages. Invariably they are clothed in words which, under

---

<sup>11</sup> Ham Mukasa, "Simuda Nyuma," 3rd volume, unpublished typescript in Makerere College Library, n.d. (I have a microfilm copy), 85.

<sup>12</sup> Walser, *Luganda Proverbs*, iv, preface.

their obvious sense, hide a deeper meaning." Walser concludes with a proverb about proverbs: "a proverb is to speech what salt is to food".

### Songs

If proverbs are simultaneously cryptic and revealing, no less so are songs. The Baganda have often used songs to celebrate events; those songs are sometimes remembered long after the events they commemorate have slipped into oblivion. One example which the Baganda might have preferred to forget was composed in the late 1870's when Kabaka Mutesa became ill with gonorrhoea:<sup>13</sup>

"Ataline nziku mugwagwa; atalina nziku mudembe."

(He who does not have gonorrhoea is a fool; he who does not have it is a clodhopper).

If one were not aware of the special circumstances and the need to praise the Kabaka in all cases, the song could be a bit misleading. No doubt the missionaries found in the words confirmation of the natural sinfulness of the Baganda.

Some of the most interesting songs for the historian are those in which commoners mocked and ridiculed the over mighty. One song from the early twentieth century was sung at the expense of Sir Apolo Kagwa, prime minister and Regent of the Buganda, who was virtually running the country single-handedly with British approval under indirect rule. The song was a popular dance tune titled "Butodene":<sup>14</sup>

"Butodene, butodene: agenze entebe okutunda abana"

(Mr. Big Belly, Mr. Big Belly: he's gone to Entebbe to sell his children)

Entebbe was then the headquarters of the British colonial administration in Uganda.

Another song from a much earlier period was composed when a number of relatives of a former queen mother lost their important political offices and were rusticated to chieftaincies over small rural villages. One of these, who was particularly unpopular, was the proud and over-bearing Kamanyiro:

"Kamanyiro e nyenga: ebisinja bimenya bitanda"

(Kamanyiro at Nyenga: the fishes break the drying racks)

This was another case where I needed some help. It came from Mr. Makonzi, the elderly custodian of Africana at Makerere University Library. He told me that there

---

<sup>13</sup> See note 7 above.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Semu Kakoma at Kakiri, Busiro, 30 March 1964.

was a Luganda fable about some fishermen who had fortuitously had landed a large catch, but when they piled all the fish on the wooden racks to be smoked for sale, the racks collapsed into the fire. Thus Kamanyiro, a man heavy with fame, prestige and self-regard, was too great for the trifling position in which he was forced to retire.

Ham Mukasa's memoirs are sprinkled with songs from the late nineteenth century, though they are not as numerous or as varied as the proverbs. Both songs and proverbs enrich an historical narrative that is often less concerned with ideas and attitudes than with the preservation of unadorned factual information. For all the problems they present to the translator, they are clearly more a blessing than a curse.

### **The Problem of Luganda Orthographies**

At the meeting of the Association for the Publication of African Historical Sources (in connection with the African Studies Association conference in Atlanta, 4 November 1989) I raised the question of what constitutes the "correct" Luganda orthography, which should be presented to modern readers as the original text, alongside the accompanying English language translation? The background to the question is briefly this:

Literacy reached Buganda at the hands of European missionaries, who produced the first orthographies of Luganda in written form using the Roman alphabet. Since the French Catholic mission and the English Protestant mission were at odds, they failed to consult one another and produced differing forms of written Luganda, which in time became "official" Catholic and Protestant orthographies. Muslims naturally regarded Arabic as the proper language for religious expression, but when they wrote for other purposes in Luganda, they seem to have adopted the Protestant orthography.

Perhaps because the Protestant missionaries were British, with a language that is a spelling and pronunciation nightmare, they paid little attention to the actual sounds of the words and rendered them in the shortest possible way. Thus they wrote the word "to kill" as oku-ta, and the word "to release" as oku-ta (accent over the 'a'). In Luganda the words are pronounced differently — otherwise Buganda history would have been even more chaotic than it was; the Kabaka's order "release him" was pronounced with equal or even attention to both syllables: mu-ta, while the order "kill him" was unequally or unevenly pronounced, with emphasis on the second syllable: mu-tta. When the Protestant mission at last produced a dictionary, it recognized the problem and distinguished between the two critical verbs by putting an apostrophe before the verb "to kill": 'ta, and not before the verb "to release"; ta. In normal writing, however, Protestant Baganda like Ham

Mukasa wrote "mu-ta" for both 'release him' and 'kill him', leaving it to the context to distinguish between the two.

The French missionaries seem, unsurprisingly, to have had a better ear for the characteristic sounds of Luganda words. They wrote "-ta" for 'release' and "-tta" for 'kill', and so did their Baganda converts. The conflicting orthographies, so unhelpful for natural integration, were addressed in the 1940's by linguistic experts, who, of course, came up with a third version as the new official orthography, which was neither Protestant nor Catholic. The new version faithfully reproduced the sounds of spoken Luganda words, but at the cost of looking weird and ungainly: Sabadu (head of servants) became "Ssaabaddu". This new spelling of Ssaabaddu also resulted in its location in the dictionary under "ss" rather than "sa", a source of further confusion. The older generation regarded this new spelling as grotesque, but it was taught in schools and found its way, more or less, into newspapers and government publications.

The question I raised at Atlanta (and answered at least for myself) was which orthography should be adopted for the Luganda text to be displayed alongside the English translation of that text — the new orthography, or the original Catholic or Protestant version? I opted for the original version because that was the actual text from which the translation was made.

The alternative argument was that the new orthography might be preferable from the point of view of modern Baganda readers, who are increasingly unfamiliar with old fashioned orthographies. They might not understand the older style of spelling, and thus be unable to check the translation for accuracy. In fact, on closer examination of all three orthographies, I believe that this is a non-problem. The differences do not constitute a serious impediment to understanding. Students at Makerere University can read and understand older orthographies, though they may regard them as quaint. What they don't often understand are the songs and proverbs of the bygone era.