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# Record-keeping and political advocacy in late colonial Uganda: the case of Abataka Abasoga, Busoga, 1940 to 1950

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the nexus between record-keeping and political advocacy in the late colonial Busoga which formed one of eastern ethno-geographical regions of the Uganda Protectorate. It illustrates the vexed position of the Abataka Abasoga attempting to build and use archival knowledge while the colonial government moved against the indigenous use of archival records as a tool of anti-colonial defiance. By weaving together archival materials with secondary sources, the paper reveals the precarious position of Ugandan archival records as denoted by the subsequent regimes' involvement in the management of documentary materials. Ultimately, the example shows how the ruling regimes' interests have been central in determining the nature of information made available for future preservation and its accessibility for use by both the political elite and reading publics.

## KEYWORDS

Uganda National Archives; Jinja District Archives; colonial legacy; Abataka Abasoga Association; colonial and post-colonial regimes

Despite the infrastructural challenges of decay and neglect enveloping Ugandan records management, there has been a persistent increase in archive-based scholarship since the 2000s. Both local and international graduate students and scholars are not only studying the archive but also using it as a source of evidence in the humanities and social sciences scholarships. This “archival turn” is a result of multi-sectional engagements involving academics, librarians, archivists, literary scholars and social theorists who took the initiative to publicise the dilapidated state of Ugandan records (Steadman 2011, 332).

For instance, F.P. Nayenga-Batala, a Doctoral researcher with the University of Michigan during the early 1970s, reminisces about the disorganised condition of the Jinja District Archives housed at the basement of the Jinja District Administrative Offices, which became “vulnerable to flooding, feasted on by rodents, termites and paper-eating insects . . . [and] many of the earlier files had been burnt by the British in 1962 when Uganda became independent,” which ultimately affected the progress of his research (Taylor 2021, 532; Peterson 2021, 3; Nayenga-Batala 1976, 41). Nayenga-Batala's aim was to survey the colonial records pertaining to Busoga's economic policy which were unfortunately non-existent. Worse still, the Busoga Growers Cooperative Union files containing vital economic information had been burnt by an Indian minority, who, it was claimed, were in charge of Uganda's economic sector, when they were expelled by President Idi Amin in 1972. Consequently, Nayenga-Batala spent “three

and a half months with the help of two research assistants, traversing through the heaps of uncatalogued papers, housed in a dirty room with no lighting” (41). The wrecked state of archives coupled with the lack of essential guiding records rendered it difficult for Nayenga-Batala to reconstruct Busoga economic history of the initial years of colonial rule and, thus, hard to rely on oral traditions to address the ensuing methodological lapse in his research.

Stuart McConnell narrates facing a similar situation during his archival research in Uganda in the early 2000s. He notes:

... archives are ... in a uniformly poor condition ... piled from floor to ceiling with files, generally in poor condition. There is no window, nor is there any lighting and the door cannot be fully opened because of the number of files within, which have spilled from the far end of the room to the door end. ... The archivist did not know what kind of files were in the side room, either in terms of theme or chronology. ... While the files were boxed, the boxes only served to protect the files and do not collect the files of a similar nature together. (McConnell 2005, 470, 474–475)

Subsequently, according to McConnell, any potential archive-based scholars would have to spend the best part of his year of research in Uganda “looking through every file kept in the bowels of the archive” (2005, 469). Apart from the availability of a few catalogues, the “entries give limited information as to what files actually contain” (474). Related to McConnell’s observation, Edgar Taylor illustrated the uncatalogued condition of the existing archival collections as “most files sat beneath other debris or in conditions that inhibited prolonged human presence, guarded by mold, bats, bees and dust ... J.D.A. [Jinja District Archives] was kept in a basement room that was periodically flooded with several feet of water” (Taylor 2021, 540).

The appalling situation of the archives compelled President Yoweri Museveni’s government to start the rehabilitation of Ugandan records. The project was initiated by Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda, who officiated the opening of the World Bank-funded National Records Centre and Archival building at Wandegaya, Kampala, in 2016 (Peterson 2021, 5). The building houses archival materials from the Uganda National Archives (UNA) and Jinja District Archives (JDA), and efforts are underway to have records from all the former colonial districts of the Uganda Protectorate centralised.

The resurgence of the archival spirit has also been facilitated by the reorganisation of the records in the different Ugandan archival collections by both local and international archivists and funding agencies. For instance, Derek Peterson of the University of Michigan and Edgar Taylor of the Department of History at Makerere University have done extensive work on rehabilitating, reorganising and cataloguing the endangered archives in the different parts of Uganda. With the support of the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the duo worked with students of the University of Michigan and Makerere University in a rigorous exercise of cataloguing materials of the colonial and post-colonial era such that, by 2012, a nine-volume catalogue of the UNA had been created (Peterson 2021, 3; Taylor 2021, 544).

Subsequently, the UNA, which had only two colonial-handwritten lists of A-Series Secretariat files and certain other files, is now fully catalogued and constitutes Provincial documents collected from the offices of Colonial District Commissioners and the C-Series Confidential Secretariat Minute Papers (Taylor 2021, 542). In 2015, Peterson’s

team, working with the students of Busoga University, rescued the dilapidated and water-flooded JDA, “scraped off the mud, organized the files and created a catalogue for the whole collection” (Peterson 2021, 3). Eventually, the JDA collections were fully catalogued, reorganised, updated and centralised at the archival building in Kampala. Although these archives play a potential role as “sites of transformation,” scholars should not embark on anachronistic analyses (Megan 2020, 1). Rather, as Carolyn Hamilton suggests, it is necessary to “grapple with the complexity of the processes of the making of the sources,” as well as the “experiences and inheritances that shaped the accounts” (2017, 346). Such efforts involve not only engaging with the “specific sources but with the larger forces and factors at work across time that made, shaped and reshaped what came to be the available wider archive” (Hamilton 2017, 346).

### **Colonial and early post-colonial attempts at archival restrictions**

The evolution of the Uganda National Archives was a twentieth-century development that emanated from the archival developments in Britain during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For instance, the founding of the Public Records Office in Britain in 1835 as one of the largest archival centres in the world, covering over 80 miles of shelving, opened an epoch of political debates and academic research which shaped the progress of British imperialism in Africa (Tosh 1984, 43). By the close of the nineteenth century, British politicians and academia were advocating to both government and universities to invest further in archives as testimony for investigative enquiry. For example, in 1898, Samuel Muller, J.A. Feith and Robert Fruin published the manual for the arrangement and description of archives which became a significant piece in stimulating the history of archival thinking and practice (Caswell 2016, 4). On a similar note was Lord Acton’s 1895 call for a documentary age as one way of ensuring objectivity in historical reconstruction (Peterson and Giacomo 2009, 2). Of course, government agencies and scholars had diverse interests in the development of archives. For instance, whereas governments sought to utilise the derived knowledge to strengthen and expand the empire, scholars saw archives as evidentiary sources whose accessibility would help to make state agents accountable (Caswell 2016, 4).

Despite the diversity of interests, the development of British archives impacted the quality of historical thought and the generation of practical knowledge which contributed to the expansion of empire (Steadman 2011, 32). Consequently, Uganda was “woven” into the British colonial spectrum alongside a number of African states which became “colonial pawns” at the close of the nineteenth century. The Ugandan colonial administration took the initiative to reorganise government records as one of the ways of proper documentation practice that would promote and sustain the politics of empire (Tosh 1984, 43). However, one major challenge at the time was the lack of indigenous professional manpower to manage the archive since the available Christian Mission schools had only trained semi-elite clerks for interpretation and chieftainship roles (Mudoola 1978, 24–27).

The colonial government countered the manpower challenge by employing British personnel to handle the documentation of Ugandan records. Two British archivists, P.I. English and J.P.M. Fowle, worked on the Secretariat files at the imperial headquarters in Entebbe, significantly contributing to the eventual

establishment of the Uganda National Archives in the 1950s (Taylor, Rockenbach, and Bond 2014, 164). Lizabe Lambrechts writes that “archives do not simply come into being but are the results of the socio-political and economic contexts in which they are created” (2020, 311). The establishment of the Uganda National Archives therefore carried the colonial connotation of preserving the empire against the threat of indigenous political materialisation spearheaded by the emergent Abataka Associations in Uganda which ultimately led to the deliberate and strategic alienation of indigenous perspectives in the process of archival formations.

Besides, throughout the empire, British colonial policy at the time of imperial retreat entailed the destruction of records of incriminating evidence that would trivialise the colonial legacy in the aftermath of independence. For example, as British colonial rule in India neared its end after 185 years, the Governor ordered the colonial records to be brought to his compound where they were burnt so as to conceal evidence about British colonial mismanagement (Taylor 2022). Similarly, as Kenya’s independence approached, the departing colonialists under Dick Cashmore ensured that all records since 1945 were either destroyed or withdrawn and concealed in order to avoid post-colonial African critique of British rule (Taylor 2021, 537). According to Peterson, colonial policy regarding records management constituted the “British government’s effort to limit what the independent governments of Africa could know about the colonial states they had displaced” (2021, 8). It was therefore “necessary” for the colonialists to “weed out” records of potential incriminating evidence in order to avoid possible embarrassment in the future. Peterson quotes R. Clifford of the colonial administration in Kenya: “we must not pass on any material to African governments which may embarrass Her Majesty’s Government or any other Government . . . or lead to the identification of a source of Police intelligence” (2021, 8–9). Peterson resonates with John Tosh who notes that the “departing colonial masters destroyed their files for fear that sensitive material would fall into the hands of their African successors” (Tosh 1984, 42).

The British colonialists were involved in a similar campaign in Uganda at the time of the transition to Independence in the early 1960s. For instance, the concealment and destruction of Protectorate records that were perceived as perilous to the reputation of the British colonial legacy became part of the government programme. Protectorate records which showed potential incriminating evidence were either transported to London via the Royal Navy and Airforce or drowned in the Indian Ocean and/or Lake Victoria (Peterson et al. 2021, 9). In Busoga district, Eastern Uganda, old files on the development and progress of local government were either destroyed or hidden by the British. The institutional politics of colonialism were aimed at insulating access to information which could be used to question some of the policies of the colonial state by African political agency. To this effect, access to information was restricted to prevent scholarly criticism as it was deemed perilous to the colonial legacy. Archives therefore remained out of reach for most scholars despite their potential in resolving contentious intellectual debates. For instance, sociologist Peter Gutkind was denied access to the archives by Governor Cohen in the 1950s (Taylor 2021, 536). Post-colonial governments emulated the same policy of not only restricting access to the archives but also intimidated and murdered academics who potentially sought access to records collections seen as sensitive (Taylor 2021, 536–538). The intellectual contribution of archives to academic

scholarship therefore remained marginal as respective scholars could not get in conversation with the ideas, debates and lineages in the archival centres (Caswell 2016, 3).

Post-colonial governments followed in the footsteps of their colonial founders. Between 1962 and 1971, President Milton Obote's government adopted a restrictive policy to control academic research. According to Peterson, Obote's Secretary to the Cabinet wrote a detailed letter to an undergraduate student at Makerere instructing him as to what he could research for his thesis on the history of Busoga. Peterson further notes that David William Cohen, while conducting his PhD research in Uganda, was ordered by Obote's government not to study the Buganda region and any aspects of contemporary history but to rather focus on the distant past of precolonial Busoga (2021, 11–12). It is against such a background of state impediments that Cohen resorted to conducting oral interviews about Busoga's pre-colonial distant past which were destined to enlighten his future scholarly trajectory as an anthropologist and historian of oral traditions.

### **The Abataka Abasoga Abazaliranwa Ab'ensikirano and the anti-colonial politics of record-keeping**

Indigenous groups sought to develop their own archival and record-keeping practices that often ran counter to official state policy. Edgar Taylor, Ashley Brooke Rockenbach and Natalie Bond note that already by the 1950s, “independent researchers produced their own archives of oral traditions with which they wove accounts of the social and political changes they perceived around them” (2014, 164). This trend of individualistic as well as state archiving was bound to impact the debates between the colonial government and the Ugandan political activists of the late colonial era as each used the archive to present its own interpretation of history in consonance with the specifically intended objectives. The ensuing robust contestations between the colonial government and Abataka Abasoga Associations in the 1930s to 1950s unravel what Lambrechts describes as archival “control over the evidence of representation and the power over access to it, endowing us with some measure of power over history, memory and the past” (2020, 312).

The *Abataka Abasoga Abazaliranwa Ab'ensikiranho* emerged as a “native” elitist group in the late 1940s under the incisive leadership of Zefaniya Munaba, one of Busoga's Baisengobi princes, who advocated for the newly created ObwaKyabazinga Bwa'Busoga to become a monarchy and for Ezekiel T. Wako to become king. Munaba had earlier served as one of the leaders of the Young Basoga Association (YBA), a socio-political group that surfaced in the 1920s as the voice of the Basoga with the intention to hold government accountable for its obligations (Mudoola 1976, 34). However, conflicting interests between the Baisengobi “princes” and non-Baisengobi “commoners” impeded the effective functioning of the YBA, subsequently threatening its existence. Ultimately, the non-Baisengobi seceded to create the Abataka Association which, under the astute leadership of Azaliya Mutekanga remained “a thorn in the flesh” of the Baisengobi interests throughout the 1930s and much of the 1940s.

The Baisengobi's educational privilege, domination of Chieftainship positions and desire to promote hereditary rights of chiefs were aspects that bred animosity among the non-Baisengobi. The Abataka Association often criticised the Baisengobi on these

grounds. For instance, in a letter to the District Commissioner of Busoga in 1937, the Abataka Association attacked the Baisengobi's "selfish" interests alleging:

The Baisengobi motto reads "educate our members only and leave other clans behind not in education only but also in all matters of importance." The Baisengobi hate to see other members of different clans getting up, the Baisengobi are never and never will they be thankful or grateful to any other clan or person which or who is not a Mwisengobi. (Mutekanga 1937)

The Abataka Association's suggestion to the colonial government emphasised equity in education, arguing: "rather than educating the sons of the Baisengobi only, we request that all people should be given a chance and from them invaluable people will be obtained for the good of our tribe" (Mutekanga 1937).

The Abataka became conscious of the Baisengobi's claim to "nativism," ultimately contending that "the peasants are the Abataka of Busoga," and expressed their "very deep regret that the Baisengobi Saza chiefs in Busoga have finally decided to re-establish the obsolete procedure of hereditary chiefship in Busoga," a system which they perceived as "the mother of slavery, a hated and cursed thing" (Mutekanga 1937). The Abataka Association emphasised to the government its mandate of "supporting the weak against the strong, and the oppressed against the oppressor," and urged it to intervene for the commoners' interests (Mutekanga 1937). It was the modicum of colonial records which provided the basis for the Abataka's activism. For instance, in the earlier colonial times, the colonial government had presented itself as the arbiter in matters of Busoga conflict as indicated by historian Anthony Low:

[British Commissioner Gerald] Portal, as early as April 1893, dispatched Lieutenant Arthur ... to take command of ... the countries of *Usoga* telling him not to fear to decide on any form of difference and disputes brought to his adjudication. (Low 2009, 172–173)

The tendency to recap to the colonial government its obligation therefore illuminates the Abataka's strong perception of the claimed aims of the colonial project. Thus, not only did the Abataka Association use colonial records as the basis to contest for inclusive opportunities but also to advocate that the colonial government held obligations to the socio-political wellbeing of its subjects regardless of the privilege of birth and status. The archive in this case served as a tool for the Abataka Association to challenge what it perceived as unwanted policies in local government practice.

The *Abataka Abasoga Abazaliranwa* therefore emerged as a counter-force against the Abataka Association in the 1940s to safeguard the Baisengobi interests. Under Munaba's leadership, the *Abataka Abasoga Abazaliranwa* described themselves as "Basoga owning land in Busoga ... whose all predecessors were born and died in Busoga ... and, are responsible for preserving customs and traditions of Busoga," and thus regarded as their mandate to "elect him whom we find fit and remove whomever we find unfit for ruling" (Munaba 1948). It further presented itself as "a constituent of all clan leaders in Busoga" whose "petitions and memorandums on matters of Government should not be regarded as misrepresentations" (Munaba 1948). Writing and record-keeping became the *modus operandi* for both the colonial government and Abataka in countering each other's perception on Busoga politics and historiography. The Abataka often convened, recorded minutes and engaged

the colonial government in a bureaucratic form of documentary correspondence much to the chagrin of the British political officialdom that ultimately dismissed the former's writings as bereft of any antecedent of historical representation. For instance, T.M. Cox, serving Commissioner for Eastern Province, often urged the Chief Secretary at Entebbe to ignore the Abataka writings, citing a lack of valid claims of indigenous representation, and he was always conscious that any positive response would portray the government as "weakening in its attitude towards them" (Cox: PC., E.P. 1949).

Amidst the intensification of the Abataka activism, Uganda experienced spontaneous riots which began from Buganda Kingdom and spread like bush-fire to the rest of the Protectorate. These riots, which broke out on April 25 1949, grew out of popular indigenous grievances against the colonial government and its perceived Asian economic agents (Mutibwa 2016, 127–128). The colonial government retaliated by imposing a ban on all forms of Abataka activism in order to deter the latter from joining in the insurrection. Anxious to cause no further trouble, Munaba made the following remarks to his fellow bataka:

The DC Busoga has given a warning to all of us the Abataka of Busoga that he who will be found taking part in affairs relating to the disturbance in Busoga will be punished. As your President, I tell you that it is proper to follow this advice which the DC has given us so that we may be able to maintain our dignity and obedience towards both of our Governments. I therefore tell you that during this very busy time for the PG, it is not worthy to hold meetings connected with our Butaka affairs. It is desired that we be patient till the country has returned to normal so that we too may not be thought to be disloyal. (Munaba 1949b)

However, uncertain of the Abataka's neutrality, the colonial government adopted a firmer and damaging stance towards the former's attitude and records. Thus, on April 30 1949, the same day of Munaba's declaration, nine Abataka members were arrested and their books, letters, files and any other records confiscated on the orders of the DC. Those arrested included, "Z. Munaba, E. Wandira, Amulaferi Kisambira, Y. Bwoye, M. Kafuyu, Y.K. Zirabamuzaale, A. Kaduyu, Kitamirike and his friend" (Munaba 1949b). Abataka meetings were only allowed again later, with permission from the Resident Magistrate of Jinja, in the aftermath of the colonial obliteration of African uprising (Munaba 1949a). However, following the persistent British colonial disregard for their petitions, the Abataka influence waned to the extent that by 1950 it had faded out of Busoga political activism. Nevertheless, despite its egress from Busoga's political scene, it was able to weaponise record-keeping not only as a means of holding the colonial government to account but also to sustain its longevity and commitment to political activism. The archive helped its members to elucidate the credibility of their political ambitions in the face of both the colonial government and the rival indigenous socio-political groups, particularly the Abataka Association.

The Abataka activism illustrates Hamilton's description of archives as "not simply collections of sources and research but also subjects of critical enquiry in their own right" (2017, 347). Hamilton's argument resonates with Taylor who labelled the archive as "a time bomb agency to be marshalled as evidence and sources for particular versions of historical truth" (2021, 547). The colonial government was conscious of the potential of records as conceivable sources of "lethal" ideas and was therefore eager to "purge" all the



available documents from the onset of the decolonisation process in the 1950s up to the moment of granting of Uganda's independence in 1962. The colonial interest in destroying potential records was to insulate the growth of indigenous critical knowledge perceived as perilous for the survival of the colonial state. It therefore strictly censored, controlled, concealed and destroyed potentially informative records rather than having them "fall" into the hands of their African subjects.

Restrictions on the Ugandan archives have also been compounded by legal constraints, particularly the 50-year embargo on government records to be availed for public utilisation. In Britain, where the rule originated in 1958, this constraint was reduced to 30 years in 1967 after a series of vigorous academic and public campaigns against it. However, Uganda, being a "colonial child" of imperial Britain, had adopted the 50-year rule during the Protectorate period and has maintained it up to the present day. Other former colonial powers such as France and Italy also adopted periodical restrictions to archival information. France, like Britain, guarantees a period of 30 years, while Italy still observes the 50-year rule. Such legal constraints are possibly intended to shield state leaders from legal reprisals for the decisions they make while in power. Only the United States, with its Freedom of Information Act of 1975, allows both scholars and the general public much wider access to archival records (Tosh 1984, 44). Such legal restrictions hindered scholars' access to state records even in the subsequent aftermath of colonial disengagement. For instance, Nayenga-Batala could not access the post-1920 files in the UNA at Entebbe, yet the time scope of his study terminated in 1939. It was only the disorganised nature of the District Commissioner's Archives in the JDA that saved Nayenga-Batala from frustration, and he was able to view the post-1920 records which could not be accessed in the strictly controlled and managed Entebbe archives (Nayenga-Batala 1976, 43). However, in situations of effective organisation, historians researching more recent social and political phenomena have to rely on other sources of information such as oral tradition.

## Conclusion

This paper analysed the interconnection between record-keeping and political activism in late colonial Busoga, Uganda Protectorate. It demonstrated the tendency by the Abataka Abasoga groups to try and keep records as the basis for socio-political mobilisation against the discriminatory interests of both their indigenous rival assemblages as well as the colonial state in different contexts at various times. It illustrated the ultimately unsuccessful position of the Abataka Abasoga in trying to create and use the archive as a weapon to counter the colonial state's interests. It also showed how the colonial state adopted a hostile stance against indigenous politics and the tendency by the Abataka Abasoga to accumulate indigenous records as a source of reference for their anti-colonial activism. The paper reveals the fate of Ugandan archival records as a phenomenon of state functionalism. Both the colonial and post-colonial states have adopted strict controls, determining the accessibility and usage of Ugandan archives. Thus, the prevalence of state politics in the archive determines not only our use but also our interpretation and perception of it. The study also revealed the perilous condition of the Ugandan archives as a deliberate attempt by the state to determine what "falls into the hands" of its

indigenous subjects. In brief, state survival forms one major aspect in archival preservation and sustenance in contemporary Uganda. Ultimately, the assiduous contestations between the Abataka Abasoga and the imperial-state in Uganda evidently illuminates the latter's unrelenting determination for survival against the former's efforts at record-keeping and weaponisation.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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