

# Ntusi and the development of social complexity in southern Uganda

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Southern and western Uganda has long been recognised by archaeologists and historians as a region of considerable political and social complexity (Sutton 1993). A longstanding view has proposed the existence of formal kingdoms dating back many centuries. This hypothesis posits the imposition of a fully fledged political system by outsiders on an indigenous population. This single polity was seen subsequently to have disintegrated into the various kingdoms encountered by Europeans in the nineteenth century.

In recent years this position has been criticised on several grounds. First, political structures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were quite clearly being projected into the past to generate antiquity and legitimacy for these systems of power (Henige 1974). Secondly, these reconstructions suggesting great antiquity for formal political structures played important roles in the different audiences of the colonial genre (Berger 1980). They were adopted within colonial ideologies with their emphasis on pale-skinned, outside innovators. They were also adopted by indigenous political elites who were preoccupied with maintaining authority during changing political climates. These putative ancient kingdoms have also been promoted in recent years, as independent Uganda has gone through a resurgence in identity and historical pride.

Behind the interpretation of archaeological remains within this framework, there is an underlying assumption that big physical features are big feats of construction, which presuppose considerable political organisation and coercion. Thus the ten kilometres of ditches at Bigo and at other sites in western Uganda readily established the impressive nature of the society's political organisation (Wayland 1934; Posnansky 1969). No consideration was made of the ability of non-stratified societies to produce feats of construction over long periods of time.

Not so obviously within this structure was the site of Ntusi (Lanning 1970). Ntusi, located some fifteen kilometres south of Bigo, has no ditch network, which suggested that it was a less politically significant site. Two features may however be considered to be feats of construction: the Bwogero and the mounds.

Fieldwork conducted in 1988, 1989 and 1991 was intended to review these models, using the site of Ntusi as a base. The fieldwork attempted to view the political structure at Ntusi by considering the surrounding area. Thus, archaeological survey was conducted to examine the occupation of the surrounding area, whilst excavation assessed the connection between these surrounds and Ntusi itself.

Figure 1 Archaeological sites in western Uganda.

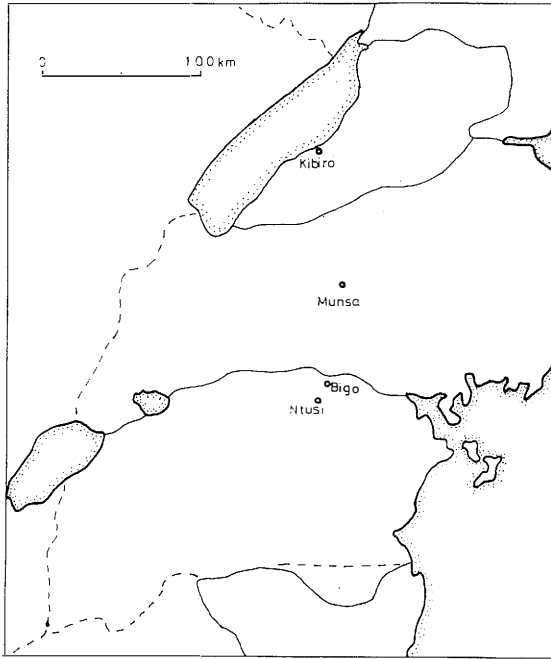
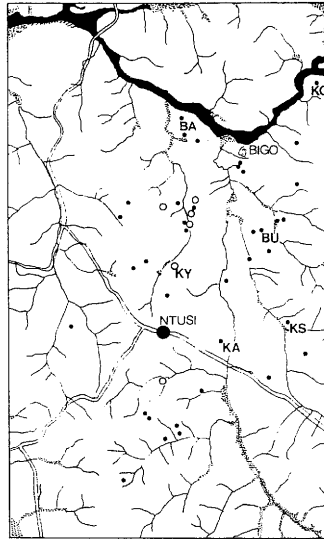


Figure 2 Archaeological sites in Mawogola.



- sites with iron slag
- Bigaga
- \*BU Buteranro
- \*KA Kakinga
- \*KO Kasonko
- \*KS Kasebwongera
- KY Kyambogo

Archaeological survey in surrounding Mawogola encountered more than fifty sites (Reid 1990: 1991). This survey covered a sample universe of 560 km<sup>2</sup> and provided 5% coverage. All the sites encountered were characterised by roulette decorated pottery which is not known to occur in the Interlacustrine region before the 9th century (Desmedt 1991). These sites were in general between 0.1 and 0.5 hectares in size and frequently had pronounced ash and dung concentrations forming low banks at their lower ends. Particularly within these banks, much pottery and well preserved bone is present. The latter assemblages were heavily dominated by cattle with a strong preference for immature animals.

The major focus of excavations was on the site of Ntusi itself. Archaeological debris is scattered over an area of around 100 hectares. Excavations at several locations produced radiocarbon samples from which dates were obtained which consistently indicate that Ntusi was occupied at an earlier period than Bigo.

Excavations concentrated on a number of key areas. Firstly two large mounds were excavated. These are both around forty metres in diameter and both revealed a depth of archaeological deposit of greater than four metres. Sequences of radiocarbon readings were obtained from both features and indicate creation of the deposits between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries.

An area at the northern end of the site was selected for extensive excavation because of the presence of low banks similar to those encountered in the regional survey. This was also an area which had not obviously been cultivated in recent years. Radiocarbon dating consistently suggested that this area was occupied in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries. Faunal assemblages from these various locations again indicated a predominance of young cattle, although mortality profiles were markedly older.

Finally, some consideration was given to the Bwogero (Sutton 1985; Reid 1991). This features a central area of hollowed out valley bottom surrounded by banks of the recast valley clay. The volume of material removed from the base is almost 30,000 m<sup>3</sup>. This huge feature is functionally ambiguous. No cultural material is present on the surface and only a small amount of badly abraded pottery was encountered in excavations. As a dam, the most likely function given the valley bottom location, it is poorly designed, having no obvious point of entry for water. Excavations in the base of the feature indicated basal deposits of weathered kaolinite, which is used in the present as a decorative material.

### **Social organisation**

This new evidence for both the scale and detail of the archaeology of Mawogola, combined with subsequent political developments in the region, encourages questions on the scale of social organisation present in Mawogola. The evidence provides several strands of inference.

Firstly, evidence of social organisation can be derived from the settlement pattern generated by archaeological survey. Quite clearly there is a two-tier settlement hierarchy present, based simply on size and also on economic grounds. Excluding Bigo, which appears to be a later phenomenon, Ntusi, at 100 hectares is bigger than any of the other sites in Mawogola. The survey also suggests that Ntusi lies at the centre of the distribution of the smaller sites and that the latter do not occur more than twenty kilometres distant from this centre.

Economically, there is greater artefact diversity at Ntusi. This is particularly noticeable in the numbers of glass and cowrie shell beads. Whilst on no sites can they be considered common, glass beads were much more rarely encountered at the outlying sites than at Ntusi itself. Items of adornment were also made of more locally available materials. Beads of both ivory and ostrich eggshell were recovered at Ntusi, but not at the outlying sites. Elephants would certainly have been present in Mawogola, but the occurrence of ostriches is less certain and they may represent a traded entity

within the broader region. Ivory was also being worked at Ntusi. Excavations in the midden of a household at the northern end of the site encountered ivory which ranged in its working from discarded exterior flakes, through angular chunks and pieces shattered during drilling, to finished items. The final evidence for diversification of economic activities at Ntusi is for iron-working with the encountering of localised tuyeres and slag in surface finds.

A possible further piece of evidence for the economic dominance of Ntusi over its surrounds, comes from the faunal remains encountered during excavations. Excavation at the outlying sites of Kakinga, Kasebwongera and Buteraniro, indicates that there is a heavy preference for very young cattle, of less than one and a half years of age (Reid 1991). At all the locations excavated at Ntusi, however, the majority of cattle remains are subadult, approaching three years old, with a small number of old animals. The bulk of these cattle bones on archaeological sites will no doubt represent offtake from the male elements in the herd. This imbalance in animal distribution could be the result of more mature animals being taken to Ntusi from the outer sites, either through economic or political coercion. Alternatively these age structures may mainly be a function of the smaller numbers of inhabitants at the outlying sites. In the latter case, quite simply, there is no reason to let an animal use up water and pasture reserves, if the meat of the slaughtered animal is more than can be consumed within the settlement or redistributed locally. Mortality structures observed in Mawogola may therefore be a function of size of settlement, rather than any political or economic factor.

A second insight into the social organisation at Ntusi and its hinterland is provided by a consideration of class. In the kingdoms of the late second millennium AD (excluding Buganda), class division was very much rooted in the exclusive access to reproductive components of cattle herds (Steinhart 1981). Thus exclusive social entities emerged, based on pastoralism and on agriculture. At Ntusi, analysis of faunal remains from different locations at the site, uniformly indicate the dominance of cattle production, with 80% to 90% of the identifiable bone being cattle (Reid 1991). Furthermore, analysis of the ageing evidence of this sample indicates intricate herd management strategies, suggesting a highly productive cattle economy. The outlying sites, in their structure, also indicate the considerable influence of stock-keeping. They are characterised by long low banks at their lower ends, consisting of ash and dung. These frequently arc, giving the impression that they follow the edge of a rounded feature. The interior of this feature often has low artefact densities and a deflated sediment structure. This evidence all suggests a small settlement, centred around a stock pen.

There is also, however, evidence for agricultural production (Reid 1993; Sutton 1993). This is in the form of curved iron blades, quernstones and storage pits. The iron blades, which are tanged, most closely resemble recent grain harvesting knives. Quernstones are found on every site and are particularly scattered across Ntusi. The storage pits are frequently found around structures. They are between one and two metres in depth and are "bell-shaped", with a narrow neck near the top of the subsoil into which they are cut. Their function as storage pits is suggested on the basis of their frequent occurrence and their shape, allowing easy covering. In one pit, a cluster of carbonised grain was recovered. In another, an ashy fill was excavated, several centimetres thick which followed the vertical side of the pit, rather than the other horizontal strata. This may have been a pit lining, an important feature in counteracting insect disturbance of stored grain.

Most importantly for this consideration of class is the location of this evidence of cattle and agricultural production. At Kakinga, where features in the soil indicate the possible shape of the cattle-enclosure, and where the faunal remains provide ample evidence for the presence of cattle, grain knives and quernstones were also found. At the northern end of Ntusi, excavations revealed several overlapping structures immediately above a midden. The animal bones from the midden clearly indicate the predominance of cattle-keeping. Around the structures were found a number of pits, with characteristic bell-shaped profile and one with carbonised grain. In the midden and around the houses and pits quernstones were frequently encountered and a number of grain harvesting

knives were also recovered. On this evidence, it may be concluded that at this time cattle production and agriculture were not exclusive, but were practised within the same household. By inference, the sharp class divisions of later years had not yet emerged. The emergence of such class divides would have been essential in the transition to statehood.

### **Ntusi in broader perspective**

This review of evidence for social organisation has thus far largely been concerned with inference derived from comparison with later historical institutions. It is also possible to derive information on social and economic changes by considering Ntusi in broader regional perspective and by comparing the Mawogola evidence with earlier periods (Reid 1995).

The archaeological tradition prior to the end of the first millennium AD in the Interlacustrine region, characterised by Urewe pottery, has only been encountered in ecologically restricted locations. These occurrences are thus confined to the western and northern shores of Lake Victoria, the Nile and Kagera Rivers and the highlands of western Rwanda and Burundi and neighbouring Zaire. It has been noted that these are locations where gathering and hunting would have remained an important potential resource and where agriculture would have been largely risk free. Movement away from these areas, into drier more risk-laden locations, would have required the development of the ability to store food to counteract bad years.

The settlement at Ntusi, commencing in the eleventh century AD, represents the first occupation of the central southern grasslands. The archaeological survey around Ntusi failed to recover any Urewe pottery and excavations at Ntusi itself produced a single Urewe sherd, amongst the tens of thousands decorated by roulettes. This picture of new settlement of more marginal areas at the beginning of the second millennium AD is consistent with other archaeological surveys in western Uganda (Robertshaw 1994) and along the shores of Lake Albert (Connah 1991).

The movement into the drier grasslands from the river and lake margins was suited to, and was evidently based on, the consolidated exploitation of a single resource, cattle, which do not appear to have featured greatly in earlier economies. The drier grasslands not only provided ideal cattle-keeping territory, but also provided potentially unlimited land for this production.

Whilst the development of large scale cattle economies would have provided a major asset to the communities at Ntusi, there is ample evidence that they continued to practise grain agriculture, an activity which would have been prone to regular failure. Problems relating to the upkeep of cattle could be resolved by moving the herds. Shortfalls in agricultural produce could not be so easily replaced and so storage systems would have been important. Evidence for physical storage of crops is provided by the many bell-shaped pits which were recorded in the vicinity of households. Social storage is less easy to prove. Some evidence for new practices of social storage may be gleaned from the marked increase in size of vessels at Ntusi as compared with Urewe pottery. Most obvious are occasional very large pots with thick rims of diameters of more than fifty centimetres. At its most basic level, this indicates the need for storage of larger quantities of material. Such demand may have been stimulated by the development of larger social networks, involving larger gatherings of people or greater reciprocal demands on the household. This suggestion of social significance of these larger vessels is supported by their frequent recovery, alongside quernstones, at the base of storage pits. The throwing of large pot fragments and quernstones into the pits obviously marks the discontinuation of the pits' storage function. The deposition of quernstones, explicitly associated with agriculture, and large pots, presumably associated with some aspect of agricultural storage, suggests the ritual decommissioning of these storage pits. The incorporation of these large pots in this ritual may be a token of their significance to the society.

Taken in broader perspective, the evidence from Ntusi therefore represents key developments in relations of power and of productivity. Most basically there is evidence for increased production in the development and maintenance of sophisticated cattle economies. The power of the settlement at Ntusi, in relation to cattle, is indicated by the distribution of outlying sites. Only two sites were located in the survey within five kilometres of Ntusi and one of these, Kakinga, was subsequently radiocarbon dated to after the abandonment of the main settlement at Ntusi. This patterning, which cannot have been produced by sample bias in survey strategies, indicates the operation of an exclusion zone around Ntusi, which would have been necessary in order to maintain resources for the cattle which were undoubtedly being kept at Ntusi. Maintaining this exclusion zone would no doubt have been a major political concern for the inhabitants of Ntusi.

The size of the site at Ntusi, covering 100 hectares, is evidence for much larger communities than was previously the case. This concentration of material culture evidence and the increase in size, and possibly significance, of large ceramic vessels suggests that larger social units were also present at Ntusi. It is tempting to equate such larger social units with the development of clans; social institutions which were of great significance in the later kingdoms.

Finally, it is possible to consider changes in gender relations represented by the Ntusi evidence. If the assumption can be made that, as in recent times, agricultural production was mainly the preserve of women and cattle-keeping was exclusively the preserve of men, the development of large-scale cattle economies must have had a radically detrimental effect on the position of women in society, denying them access to key areas of production and therefore of power (Reid 1993).

### **Ntusi as a chiefdom**

Whilst it is important to draw connections between Ntusi and the states which subsequently developed in the region, it is, however, very important to recognise the differences. There are no intermediate sites in the Mawogola site hierarchy by which centralised control could be exercised by appointed or hereditary deputies of the head of the polity. The existence of cattle and agricultural production in the same household provides strong evidence that classes based on exclusive forms of economic production had not yet emerged. Using the same evidence, it can also be suggested that total gender subordination amongst cattle-keepers had not yet occurred. Women were still able to use their ability to grow crops as a platform for negotiation of power.

In conclusion, it is clear that at Ntusi, processes of political and social complexity were advanced, but they had not yet arrived at the polarised relations which were characteristic of the later states. This combination of evidence would therefore suggest that Ntusi and its hinterland was a chiefdom organised around the control of cattle resources and the control of exchange with other areas.

This interpretation on the basis of archaeological evidence is consistent with two recent approaches to the development of states and social complexity based on other sources of information. Firstly, it correlates well with Schoenbrun's historical reconstruction on the basis of comparative linguistics (Reid and Schoenbrun 1995). From around the 8th century AD, Schoenbrun (1993) recognises critical changes in society centred around the Karagwe Depression. These include: new terms for leadership, indicating changes in the structure and basis of power; an explosion of cattle terminologies, demonstrating the creation of exclusive forms of economic production; and a redefinition of gender roles, marking the reduced position of women in society.

These archaeological interpretations are also consistent with Tantala's re-analysis of the significance and historical import of oral traditions. Tantala (1989) interprets the focus of state oral traditions on individual Cwezi characters to indicate the existence prior to the states of small, highly personalised, shortlived polities, which subsequently gave rise to spirit mediums and oral traditions. Although Ntusi was occupied for a long period of time, its greatest extent was quite clearly

achieved in the 15th century shortly before its abandonment. This is the only period when all areas of the site for which radiocarbon dates are available, show occupation. This floruit at Ntusi was therefore shortlived and consistent with Tantalá's notion of brief, personalised polities.

Ntusi was, at least by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a chiefdom based on the control and exploitation of cattle. Power would have focussed on factors such as the provision of security, for inhabitants and livestock, the control of resources and resolution of disputes over access to these resources and the maintenance of markets, enabling product exchange. This interpretation of increasing political, social and economic complexity is consistent with other archaeological results. In western Uganda, Robertshaw (1994) has tentatively recognised shifts in settlement pattern, size and location in the 14th and 15th centuries which he suggests equates with increased competition over agricultural land. At Kibiro, Connah's (1991) excavations have ably demonstrated the existence of a community from the 13th century, which would have been dependent on the production and exchange of salt for its survival.

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