Uganda: impressions of a trip

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Abstract

The current paper is the first part of the trip report of the ‘grand voyage’ to Uganda and Tanzania that I took in February 2022. The primary purpose of the visit was to participate in the International conference at the Russian Cultural Center (Dar es Salaam). The first part is devoted to Uganda (Fig.1). The current paper consists of my own impressions of the places, that I visited, and my own live photos from the trip. Having only one week, I visited the so-called Grand triangle of Uganda: Kampala – Jinja – Masindi, and thus crossed the country from the Central part to the West, but in this article I focus on the sites of the Uganda capital – Kampala.

Keywords: Uganda; Kampala; boda-boda; Kasubi tombs; Baganda people; Buganda kingdom

1. Introduction

This was my first trip to Africa.

In 1907 Winston Churchill came to Uganda with a 4-day visit and described it as a beacon of hope in “the heart of the dark continent” (Monitor 2015). We can easily say that this country is one of the most beautiful and prosperous today, and it has the best of Africa covered. In this article, I focus on the main places of interest in Kampala.

2. Kampala

Kampala is known as Uganda’s bustling capital, and you can easily feel it while moving on its seven hills by motorbike... Here it is a universal and widespread vehicle. Locals call it boda boda. Originally boda-bodas were bicycles that gave one a ride between the Kenya and Uganda border posts back in the 1960s. Probably, the English phrase from border to border was later transformed into boda-boda. Nowadays the word boda-boda means a Ugandan motorcycle taxi (Carpenter 2010). In neighboring Kenya, they are more frequently called piki pikis, this form originated from English pick up. The traffic is terrible in Kampala, but the boda-boda drivers can pass between cars or on the sidewalk, so one can reach a desirable destination on time. For thousands of young Ugandans, boda-bodas are a vital way to try to make some honest money. Today one can book a boda-boda taxi online from special sources, and some ambitious guys buy 2 bikes to employ someone else to drive the second one for them (Smith 2015).

The city itself is bright and very green. There are many parks – favorite haunts of senior citizens. In the center of the city, on one of the small lawns, rises the Monument of Independence. Uganda received independence on 9th October 1962, and it is rather symbolic, that on the same day Kampala became the capital of Uganda, taking this privilege from Entebbe. The structure of the monument depicts a man unwrapping his child and raising the
kid to touch the sky, which means the newborn country that was just freed from the bondage of colonial rule (Achieve Global Safaris 2023). The monument was built and put up by Gregory Maloba, a former student and Art teacher at Makerere University’s Margaret Trowel School of Industrial and Fine Art. According to press reports of the time, Maloba was paid a token of £900 for a job he is said to have completed in one month. The monument was placed in what then was called King George V Jubilee Memorial Gardens, replacing the statue of King George V of Britain (Bisiika 2021).

Fig. 1. Location of Uganda in Africa (image source – Uganda Investment Authority 2023)

The Tombs of Buganda Kings at Kasubi (a hill in Kampala approximately 5 km northwest of the central business district) also serves as an important historical and cultural symbol for Uganda and East Africa as a whole. Its spatial organization, starting from the border of the site marked with the traditional bark cloth trees, leading through the gatehouse, to the main courtyard, and culminating in the large thatched building, housing the tombs of the four kabakas, represents the best existing example of a Buganda palace/burial site.
The site also serves as an important historical and cultural symbol for Uganda and East Africa as a whole. Its spatial organization, starting from the border of the site marked with the traditional bark cloth trees, leading through the gatehouse, to the main courtyard, and culminating in the large thatched building, housing the tombs of the four kabakas, represents the best existing example of a Buganda palace/burial site.

Fig. 2. A map of Uganda (image source – OnTheWorldMap 2021)

Buganda is a traditional kingdom of Baganda people in Uganda. It is the largest traditional kingdom in present-day Uganda. The rulers of Buganda are called kabaka. From the 18th century to the 20th century the kingdom of Buganda played a significant role in Central Africa. Uganda is the name of Buganda in Swahili, it was used by the British in 1894 when they created a protectorate centered in Buganda. The people of the Buganda kingdom initially spoke Luganda.
According to oral traditions, the first kabaka of Buganda was Kin
tu Kato, who conquered the five main tribes in the area and united the Ganda people (abbreviation from Baganda). This began a political legacy that has continued to last for over 700 years.

Since 1884, the palace at Kasubi has been repurposed as a royal tomb, where many kabakas were buried. With more than one kabaka buried in the same place, the concentration of ancestral heritage at Kasubi has made the site an incredibly important kabaka burial site in Buganda.

The Royal Tombs at Kasubi are defined by three core areas: Bujjabukula, the historic gatehouse at the entrance to the site; Olugya, the main courtyard; and Muzibu Azaala Mpanga, the former palace, and current royal tomb which enshrines the last four Buganda kings.

Muzibu Azaala Mpanga (Fig. 3), the primary building of the complex, is circular in plan with a domelike overall shape. The building is quite big; its interior extends to a height of 7.5 meters, while the external diameter is 31 meters.

Architecturally, the tomb is a powerful manifestation of Ganda cultural identity and spiritual belief systems, with a low, wide arch entranceway, regionally-unique and durable thatch work on the massive roofs (extending all the way to the ground), and interior funereal chambers separated by partitions made of bark cloth. These features were designed to create a strong impression of power and harmoniousness. Four of the kabakas are interred in these limited-access funereal chambers, designed to symbolize a sacred forest – kibira, where the spirits of the kings are believed to dwell.

According to a legend, the first kabaka named Kintu had a wife Nambi who was handed over to him after he impressed her father Ggulu1 with great deeds. Kintu did not die but disappeared into the Magonga forest.

The place can only be accessed by widows of the kings – katikkiro, and some members of the royal family. Not even the reigning kabaka can go there. Four rooms are built close to the Kibira housing the four wives of the dead kings. Each dead kabaka has a living wife. Their task is to look after the dead king. The wives are chosen from the clans of the departed queens.

Lemon grass and palm leaf mats cover the floor, while spears, drums, shields, medals, and photos of the kabakas cover the walls and other surfaces. Muzibu Azaala Mpanga, as with all the buildings on the site, is constructed of entirely organic materials such as wood, thatch, reed, wattle, and daub; this is firmly in keeping with Ganda tradition and sacred architecture.

Olugya – the courtyard is also bordered by several buildings of traditional construction, that were built for wives of kings, other members of the royal family, the spiritual guardian – nalinya, and her deputies. Their houses are traditionally constructed of wattle and daub with straw thatched roofs, although over time some were rebuilt with bricks and metal roofs added (Fig. 4).

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1 Ggulu is the deity of the sky in the mythology of the Baganda people.
Fig. 3. Muzibu Azaala Mpanga – the main building in Kasubi Tombs (photo by the author)

Fig. 4. A traditional house in Kasubi Tombs (photo by the author)
In these houses there is one notable item – rings of spears holding the roof together, each representing one of the 52 clans of Buganda. Each clan is responsible for a particular task at the tomb. The Ngeye² clan is responsible for maintaining the thatched roofs at the tombs (Mission Africa Safaris 2023). Aged members of the clan pass on their skills to the youth that takes on the task of maintaining the tombs (Fig. 5).

![A man of the Ngeye clan in Kasubi tombs](photo by the author)

Deceased kabaka’s widows tend the family graves (see Fig. 6).

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² Ngeye that means “Colobus Monkey” in Luganda.
The site became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in December 2001, when it was described as "one of the most remarkable buildings using purely vegetal materials in the entire region of sub-Saharan Africa". In 2010 the Kasubi tombs were destroyed by fire (Cyark 2022), so we visited this site after big restoration.

In this place one can also buy a very pleasant traditional souvenir – an interior decoration, made of bark cloth (see Fig. 7). Since ancient times they’ve been making a venerated fabric by pounding the inner bark of the mutuba tree (Ficus natalensis). This laborious process produces a stunning cognac-brown material held in such high spiritual regard that seven sheets of it are wrapped around a deceased Baganda’s body before burial. It is believed that this material alone has the power to transport the soul to the land of the Baganda’s ancestors (Fornal 2018). The association of the bark cloth with death and the afterlife explains why one can find it everywhere in Kasubi tombs.
Fig 7. Decorations made of bark cloth (photo by the author)

This concluded our trip to the capital of Uganda, but I wish to return one day…

References


