Centralization, Legitimacy, And Colonial Mediation: Reinterpreting the Social and Political Organization of the Wanga Within the Luhya Polity

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to reinterpret the social and political organization of the Wanga within the broader Luhya polity by examining the dynamics of centralization, legitimacy, and colonial mediation. The key objectives are to assess the historical foundations of Wanga political authority, analyze the extent of centralization prior to colonial rule, and evaluate how British colonial administration reshaped existing governance structures. The study employs qualitative historical methods, drawing on oral genealogies, British district records, missionary correspondence, and secondary literature in African history and political anthropology.

The findings indicate that the Wanga kingdom possessed significant elements of centralized authority before colonial intervention, combining ritual kingship under the Nabongo, clan-based organization, military power, and systems of tribute. However, this authority was neither absolute nor uniform, as governance involved continuous negotiation with lineage heads and other local actors. The study further demonstrates that British colonial rule did not invent Wanga centralization but rather restructured and amplified it through indirect rule, formal administrative systems, and bureaucratic support. This resulted in a hybrid political order that fused indigenous legitimacy with colonial authority.

The paper concludes that the Wanga political system evolved cumulatively, with colonial mediation reinforcing and transforming pre-existing institutions rather than creating them anew. This reinterpretation contributes to broader debates on African state formation, chieftaincy, and the impact of colonial rule, while also enriching the historiography of the Luhya community and Kenyan political development.

Keywords: Wanga Kingdom; Nabongo; Luhya polity; colonial indirect rule; African state formation; sacred kingship; western Kenya historiography

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between political centralization, legitimacy, and authority has attracted sustained scholarly attention in African historiography. Recent studies demonstrate that pre-colonial African institutions were diverse and internally constrained, with local communities actively limiting centralized power rather than passively accepting it. This challenges earlier interpretations that portrayed African political systems as either highly centralized or wholly shaped by colonial imposition. Instead, centralized authority often emerged through gradual interaction with existing social and political structures. Within this broader context, British indirect rule relied on the incorporation of locally recognized authorities, not simply as a matter of administrative convenience but as a response to practical constraints. However, this process reshaped indigenous systems by reinforcing certain leaders, redefining boundaries, and reconfiguring political identities. In western Kenya, these dynamics are evident among the Luhya, a largely decentralized polity, within which the Wanga kingdom stands out for its centralized kingship under the Nabongo. This study examines how Wanga political authority developed and transformed across the pre-colonial and colonial periods. It asks whether Wanga centralization was primarily

indigenous or significantly mediated by colonial rule. Using historical and oral sources, the paper argues that Wanga authority evolved cumulatively, combining local legitimacy with colonial restructuring.

Background of the Study

The Wanga occupy the northwestern corner of present-day Kakamega County in western Kenya, a fertile and historically significant zone situated between the shores of Lake Victoria and the plains of the Nzoia River basin. They constitute one of approximately eighteen sub-groups within the broader Luhya ethnolinguistic constellation, a Bantu-speaking grouping whose collective identity was, as Pengl, Roessler, and Rueda (2022) argue for analogous African cases, substantially consolidated through the very processes of colonial encounter it is now used to describe. The sub-groups share linguistic roots and cultural practices traceable to deeper historical interconnections, but their political structures varied enormously a fact that makes the Wanga's centralized monarchy all the more analytically significant.

Pre-colonial Luhya societies were overwhelmingly decentralized. Most sub-groups organized political life through clan councils, age-set systems, and ritual authority, with leadership that was fluid, consensual, and checked by deliberative norms. Bolt et al. (2022) identify precisely this kind of constrained, council-based governance as the modal form of pre-colonial African political organization one that colonizers encountered far more often than the monarchical model they habitually sought. The Wanga were an exception within this regional pattern. The Nabongo, the hereditary paramount ruler, presided over a tiered structure of territorial chiefs, tribute networks, and ritual specialists whose authority reinforced the sacred dimensions of royal power. Oral traditions place the founding of this dynastic institution several centuries before European arrival, linking it through genealogical narratives to the Buganda royal line a claim that, whatever its historical accuracy, functioned as a powerful legitimizing discourse within Wanga political culture.

The late nineteenth century marked a decisive turning point. The reign of Nabongo Mumia, beginning around 1882, coincided with the intensification of long-distance trade and the arrival of British imperial agents in the region. Mumia proved an adept political actor, cultivating alliances with external powers to consolidate Wanga influence across the region. His capital at Mumias became a significant node in regional trade networks and, subsequently, the administrative headquarters of British sub-imperial authority in western Kenya. The British, facing the resource constraints that Bolt et al. (2022) identify as structurally shaping indirect rule across the empire, recognized in the Wanga an already-functioning centralized institution amenable to co-optation. Mumia was confirmed as a paramount chief with jurisdiction extending far beyond the traditional Wanga territorial sphere, encompassing Luhya communities that had never recognized Wanga authority.

As Robinson (2024) notes in related African contexts, such colonial amplification of a local authority figure generated a form of legitimacy that was simultaneously rooted in pre-colonial tradition and dependent on colonial backing a hybrid arrangement whose internal tensions shaped the subsequent political history of the region. For neighboring Luhya groups, Wanga hegemony was experienced not as rightful traditional authority but as externally imposed domination enforced by armed retainers. This perception left deep traces in the political memory of communities such as the Maragoli, Bukusu, and Tiriki. Müller-Crepon (2024) has demonstrated that such colonial-era administrative configurations continue to shape inter-community political relationships well into the present. Understanding the Wanga, therefore, requires holding in sustained tension the genuine pre-colonial depth of their political institutions and the ways in which colonial mediation dramatically reconfigured the scope, character, and reception of their authority within the broader Luhya polity.

Historiographical Debate

The most important argument in the African political anthropology concerning centralised and segmentary systems was laid out by Evans-Pritchard and Fortes in African Political Systems (1940). Their work ended up creating a conceptual distinction that, although continually under attack, shaped research well past the end of the twentieth century. In this framework, centralised states were characterised by hierarchically controlled authority, territorial control and delegated administration while segmentary lineage systems were characterised by flexible, balanced relations between equal units without one central authority (Evans-Pritchard & Fortes, 1940; Vansina, 2016). While useful analytically, this binary usually misrepresented a large number of African polities that

followed their own logics internally and not European institutional models. As a result of this, the distinction sometimes imposed outside expectations on societies whose authority did not accord with conventional state models.

This framework was later the subject of research to refine it. Studies by Southall on the Alur (1956), studies by Mair on kingdoms in Africa (1977), and recent work by Herbst (2014) and Reid (2017) demonstrate that both in Africa many polities had layered, negotiated, and hybrid forms of authority that could not be easily classified. Herbst (2014) observes that the classification of societies as "stateless" caused them to be systematically undervalued by contrast with societies classed as states, which were factored in terms of some now outdated bureaucratic norms, and thus produced distorted interpretations. The case of the kingdom of Wanga demonstrates this issue insofar as some scholars exaggerate the similarity between the kingdom and fully consolidated states, while others reject its jurisdiction as too limited to be seriously compared (Lonsdale, 2016; Simiyu, 2018).

Colonial rule added to the confusion of classification. Mamdani (2018) demonstrated the transformation of African leadership by British indirect rule, which turned chiefs with negotiated and ritual power into bureaucratic middle-men responsible to colonial administrators. This process often produced forms of centralised power that had no precise precolonial antecedent but which were legitimised as returns to the ways things had been (Mamdani, 2018; Ranger, 2015). The case of the Wanga is interesting because the British came across a large indigenous institution, which they widened, bureaucratised and territorially extended, altering its internal logic and authority (Osamba, 2016; Simiyu, 2018).

The historiographical challenge is thus to identify precolonial continuity and colonial innovation. There is evidence that Wanga centralization including sacred kingship, tribute and military organisation existed prior to British rule. Yet the reign of Nabongo Mumia (r. 1882-1949) shows how colonial mediation resulted in the building of a hybrid authority structure. Historians have to move critical through these layers, and avoid the extremes of seeing the kingdom as either wholly continuous or wholly colonial, in favor of presenting its complexity in both indigenous and colonial terms.

Key Questions

This study is guided by three key questions:

1. What were the indigenous foundations of political centralization and legitimate authority within the Wanga polity prior to and during early colonial contact?

2. How did British colonial administration engage with and transform Wanga political structures, and with what consequences for intra-Luhya relations?

3. To what extent can the Wanga Kingdom be reinterpreted as an autonomous political formation rather than merely a colonial construct?

Sources and Methodology

Oral Traditions and Their Limits

Oral traditions are the primary source that is used to determine reconstruction of precolonial political structures in western Kenya, and Wanga kingdom is one of them (Were, 1967; Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo, 2018). Genealogical accounts, praise poetry and narratives of migration preserved by the holders of royal lineages and clan elders give insight into how the political history of Wanga communities was understood. The genealogical chain from the ancestor Wanga to the various Nabongo rulers and sideways to the Sakwa clan via Matar is a thread of oral memory that has been passed down and on the subject. This chain has been confirmed time and again in independent informants and in secondary sources (Were, 1967; Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo, 2018). Its uniformity in sources of various origins gives it a right to historical credibility unattainable for oral accounts.

However, oral traditions are not without limitations which should be paid attention to. As Vansina (2016) points out, genealogies may both compress long time frames into short generational lines of descent, and serve modern political interests, as well as legitimating contemporary authority. The claim that a modern political figure was descended from a precolonial royal lineage, though, does not render it false, it is important for genealogies to be understood as performing political work as much as documenting history (Vansina, 2016; Atieno Odhiambo, 2015).

In the context of Wanga, the lineage which is usually mentioned in the Odinga narrative Wanga, Matar, Rapondi, Raila (I), Odinga, Oginga Odinga, Raila Amollo Odinga is around four to five centuries. Comparing this chain with migration and expansion accounts as well as colonial-era genealogies suggests that the Wanga political community was founded from the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries (Were, 1967; Atieno Odhiambo, 2015). This approach sees oral traditions as much as evidence of continuity of history as expressions of political consciousness.

Archival and Colonial Records

British colonial records are the second major source for this study. District commissioner correspondence, administrative reports and handing over from the Kenya National Archives describe the history of one way in which the Wanga engaged with colonial authorities from the 1890s. The number of records is a measure of the importance of the Wanga as a colonial ally. Correspondence from the Imperial British East Africa Company [IBEA] particularly the records of Frederick Lugard's dealings with Nabongo Mumia in 1890-1891 provide a contemporary external perspective on political organisation in Wanga. When read critically, these records give an insight on how Wanga authority seemed for those on the outside, and how the administrative and ideological purposes of the colonial observers reflect in these records (Lugard, 1893; Simiyu, 2018).

Missionary accounts especially of the Church Missionary Society and the Quaker Africa Inland Mission at western Kenya in the 1890s, add another perspective. Although missionaries, for example, were often poorly trained ethnographers, their long residence in Wanga territory resulted in detailed accounts of social and political organisation, such as the Nabongo court, practices of succession, and administration of customary law. These accounts, however, need to be read critically because missionaries frequently imposed European categories upon African institutions, yet they provide information that is missing in official records (Osamba, 2016; Branch, 2011). Secondary scholarship in Kenyan and East African history including the works of Were (1967), Atieno Odhiambo (2015), Lonsdale (2016), Reid (2017) and Simiyu (2018) provide the comparative and interpretive framework in which the archival and oral evidence is critically assessed throughout this article.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this article is based on three overlapping theoretical traditions. First, state formation theory in the African context - especially the analysis of the challenges relating to territorial control and population management by Herbst (2014) and on early kingdoms in equatorial Africa by Vansina (2016) - gives us a structural vocabulary to assess the degree and nature of Wanga political centralisation. This way, the European models of statehood are not imposed on African contexts.

Second, the work by political anthropologists in sacred kingship, spanning from de Heusch's (2015) work on ritual legitimacy in the monarchies of Central Africa to Graeber and Sahlins's (2017) more general theorising on kingship as a recurrent yet locally-mediated form of political authority, is useful to explain ritual elements of Nabongo power. These dimensions would be ignored in a pure administrative/bureaucratic analysis. Third, the theory of indirect rule and its political effects, best worked out by Mamdani (2018), is a set of tools to understand how colonial administered re-shaped precolonial political structures without totally replacing them. It is in this respect also useful to identify those aspects of the contemporary Nabongo institution that depend in a colonial innovation and those that are the product of precolonial continuity. These three frameworks in a historically imbued and regionally specific manner are used throughout the article. They are used to inform how evidence is empirically interpreted and not to cram the evidence into pre-existing categories.

Historical Foundations of Wanga Authority

Migration Narratives and Political Identity

The origin traditions of the Wanga people point to a common descent with other sub-groups of the Luhya people, and they include the origin of this group from the Bantu expansion into the Lake Victoria basin in the first millennium CE, which was then followed by internal differentiation in the second millennium (Were, 1967; Ogot, 2015). Oral traditions preserved by the holders of the royal family line of the Wanga recount the existence of a founding ancestor, Wanga, who created the political/territorial community that takes his name. Due to this, he is credited with bringing together various lineages under centralised rule. These narratives are described as the control over the area between the Nzoia and Yala rivers modern-day Kakamega County with a central seat at Mumias, the institutional centre of the Nabongo office. This geographic anchoring separated the Wanga from the more fluid territorial arrangements of the segmentary sub-groups of the Luhya and provided a lasting foundation for sovereignty claims (Were, 1967; Ogot, 2015).

Beyond the purpose of describing the origins, these migration and foundation stories have a political purpose. They confer legitimacy to the authority of Nabongo through linking it to ancestral and cosmological frameworks and not to mere force. As observed by Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo (2018), genealogical depth came to be known as a form of political legitimacy linking rulers with a trans-generational order extending the period of authority beyond the individual tenure. Oral traditions go on to trace the Wanga lineage back to Matar, supposedly the son of Wanga who established the Sakwa clan and moved east into the areas which were subsequently linked to Luo identity. These connections seeing the Wanga as part of a wider regional kinship network which enabled alliances through common descent and demonstrated conscious political planning and not simply reproductive record-keeping (Vansina, 2016; Lonsdale, 2016)

The Wanga-Sakwa connection is one that is illuminating the expansion of Wanga influence outside of the core territory. If Matar is the progenitor of the Sakwa clan, then this tradition is a record of historical memory of demographic and political connections at a time of fluid ethnic formation. The fusion of the Luo identity with the Pedigrees (Wangas lineage) as in the case of the Odinga lineage represents a historical context where kinship across the proto-ethnic boundaries, was actively cultivated for political purposes (Ogot, 2015; Atieno Odhiambo, 2015).

Emergence of Centralised Kingship

Wanga centralised kingship did not evolve within a historical point in time, but in addition to ecological advantage and military capacity, but also as a result of ritual innovation (Simiyu, 2018; Were, 1967). The fertile land between the Nzoia and Yala rivers produced agricultural surpluses which supported specialist warriors, ritual leaders and a royal court with formal ceremonial roles (Simiyu, 2018). The kingdom's strategic position within the trade routes connecting the Lake Victoria basin with highlands inside the realm created wealth and influence over the dependent neighboring communities that rely on these trade routes (Were, 1967; Ogot, 2015).

Military expansion provided support for Wanga authority. Oral traditions describe how Nabongo rulers extended their control to neighboring communities through both the use of force and negotiation. Tributary relationships provided the court with resources and prestige and left the local governance with the already existing clans (Vansina, 2016; Simiyu, 2018). This system is an excellent example of Vansina's (2016) concept of domain formations, i.e. a royal center with authority radiating outwardly through tribute rather than direct bureaucratic control. The Wanga domain was territorially wide and administratively flat, and this affected the precolonial administration as well as subsequent colonial meddling.

Ritual authority also served as a means of supporting Nabongo power. The king was sacred, negotiated between the living and ancestral world, creating cosmic and social order, and the rain and fertility. This ritual role established the authority of the ruler apart from military ability because control of fertility practices and ancestral intercession elicited compliance which the exercise of coercion could not produce (de Heusch, 2015; Graeber & Sahlins, 2017). Military and sacred authority strengthened one another, creating an additional force for

legitimacy, effectiveness, and the extension of the monarchy's political reach to create a long-lasting and centrally recognized political system.

Table 1: Genealogical Chart of the Wanga-Sakwa-Odinga Lineage

Generational Name / Ancestor	**Historical and Political Role**	**Approximate Period**
WANGA (Eponymous Ancestor)	Founder of Wanga Kingdom; progenitor of Wanga royalty and political community	c. 15th–16th C.
MATAR (Son of Wanga)	Founder of the Sakwa clan; migrated eastward into present-day Siaya region	c. 16th Century
RAPONDI	Sakwa lineage continuation; consolidation of clan identity in Siaya	c. 17th Century
RAILA (I)	Ancestral figure; lineage transmitted through oral genealogical record	c. 17th–18th C.
ODINGA	Lineage continuation in Siaya within Luo cultural and linguistic sphere	c. 18th Century
OGINGA ODINGA	Kenyan nationalist leader; first Vice-President of independent Kenya	1911–1994
RAILA AMOLLO ODINGA	Kenyan politician; Prime Minister 2008–2013; claims 13th-generation Wanga descent	b. 1945

Table 1: Reconstructed genealogical lineage from the eponymous ancestor Wanga through to Raila Amollo Odinga, based on oral traditions documented by Were (1967), Atieno Odhiambo (2015), and publicly recorded Odinga family genealogy. Dates are approximate and reflect the inherent imprecision of oral chronology across multiple centuries.

The Architecture of Political Power

The Nabongo Institution: Sacred Kingship and Political Theology

The Nabongo institution was the hub of the political authority of the Wanga, and the sacred nature of the institution was what set the Wanga apart from the other sub-groups of the Luhya (Were, 1967; Simiyu, 2018). The Nabongo was not merely an administrative or military leader, but rather he was ritually constituted, his person being a sign of the wellbeing and integrity of the political community. Installation rituals by senior ritual specialists and heads of the lineages conferred spiritual authority, giving political power a cosmological order free of any individual ruler's personal attributes (Were, 1967; Simiyu, 2018). Elaborate taboos and prescriptions over bodies enforced the sacred status of the Nabongo and resulted in social differentiation and legitimization of authority.

Succession was a combination of both patrilineal succession and collegial selection. While successors were selected from the royal lineage, their appointment had to pass through the authentication of senior lineage heads, the abakasa who had to agree to Coronation in order for legitimacy (Ogot, 2015; Osamba, 2016). This was a system that ensured that succession was negotiated and politically contingent which gave the heads of lineages both a symbolic and material stake as far as governance was concerned. It also created potential periods of instability that were later exploited by colonial administrators to impose dynastic succession to the system and change collegial authority into a more bureaucratic model.

The reign of Nabongo Mumia (c. 1849-1949): Sacred kingship and the colonial touch The relics of character identification are representative of both the interaction between sacred kingship and colonial influence. Mumia rose to power at a time of external pressures such as Maasai raids, Nandi incursions and growing IBEA influence (Lugard, 1893; Branch, 2011). His collaboration with the British gave him military protection and administrative support with which the Wanga maintained its autonomy but expanded control over Wanga, Siaya, Vihiga and Trans-Nzoia territories. This expansion was in large part through the working of colonial administration which transferred bureaucratic and coercive powers to what was then a ritualized and negotiated institution (Simiyu, 2018). The case of the Mumia reveals how sacred kingship was providing long-term indigenous political resources that could find a way under the mediation of colonial administrators to produce a hybrid authority that involved an amalgamation of ritual, lineage, and bureaucratic elements.

Councils, Lineage Heads, and Distributed Authority

A commonly-made analytical mistake is to identify the Nabongo institution with total Wanga governance. In practice the political authority was spread throughout the heads of lineages, the elders of clans and the sub-chiefs, who derived their power from a sense of kinship recognition and the trust that this conferred on them from the community, not from royal appointment. The Nabongo organized and symbolized this distributed authority and didn't have direct control over it. Effective governance relied on negotiation between the royal center and the kinship periphery which required the cooperation of the latter that was to be cultivated and maintained (Were, 1967; Simiyu, 2018).

Senior lineage heads, known as the abakasa, were important to the rule. They managed customary law, lineage management, served as intermediaries in connections between the Nabongo court and the population and were involved in the selection of new Nabongo rulers. Their support was indispensable in relation to collection of tribute, the mobilization of military forces and the administration of ritual. In turn they received prestige and protection from their links with the Nabongo, sacred authority from which they derived their own powers and in which they resolved disputes they could not settle on their own. This relationship was reciprocal as the Nabongo who alienated the abakasa ran the risk of isolation, threats to succession and breakdown of the tributary network (Ogot, 2015; Osamba, 2016).

Wanga governance was not highly centralized in terms of downward-flowing authority from a sovereign apex. Power was immensely concentrated radially: The Nabongo was the ritual and symbolic centre, but practical authority remained with the heads of the lineages, on independent kinship claims. This sets the Wanga apart from fully consolidated states such as Buganda, in which central authority invaded local governance through royally appointed chiefs, and from fully segmentary systems in which there was no led who coordinated anything much above the level of the lineage council.

Judicial and Military Structures

The Nabongo court was the supreme court of law in Wanga political culture. It resolved disputes that the lineage-level mechanisms could not resolve, imposed sanctions for gross violations of customary norms and dealt with matters affecting the community as a whole. Wanga customary law was not written but held in common knowledge of senior elders and heads of lineages. Over time, decisions made by royalty produced precedents leading to a body of identifiable practice that became recognisable (Simiyu, 2018; Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo, 2018). The Nabongo's judicial powers had both practical and symbolic value: they dealt with conflict and also proved royal power, as decisions made by a sacred king had divine sanction unlike regular arbitration, and could not be challenged in the same way as secular authority could.

Military organization in the Wanga kingdom was a mixture army - a basic army of royal warriors - with a wider base of mobilization through age-sets and lineage obligations. The royal warriors formed a stand-down force for offensive operations, collecting of tribute, consolidation of territory and defense, which would find a way to respond faster to the threat without waiting for wider levies. In major conflicts this core might be augmented by force from lineage units throughout the tributary network to create armies much larger than that of any single segmentary Luhya sub-group. This military strength was a major source of Wanga prestige and helped the

kingdom to have tributary relationships with the neighbouring communities whose compliance or not relied partly on the credible threat of military force (Were 1967; Reid, 2017).

Social Organization as Political Infrastructure

Lineage and Clan Structures

The political structure of the Wanga kingdom was founded on patrilineal descent and clan organization; this constituted the framework for the political organization, while limiting the extent to which centralization could be achieved. Wanga society was divided into named patrilineal clans with all tracing descent from a particular ancestor, each controlling a definite territory and governed internally by the holders of senior lineages according to their own customary norms. The royal Wanga clan held a position of supremacy but the rule that it exercised over other clans was mediated by an agreement that each clan continued to exercise internal sovereignty over its members and affairs. The Nabongo was able to coordinate and supplement this authority but could not overpower it (Were, 1967; Ogot, 2015).

Kinship was not only a social relationship, it served as a major form of governance. Allocation of land, dispute resolution, labor mobilization for collective projects, regulation of marriage and organization of ritual were all carried out on a lineage rather than a central bureaucracy. The Nabongo court functioned as a final court of appeal as well as a coordinator of collective obligations but had no part in the daily business of the individual lineages. In this way, social organization constituted the structural backbone of political authority, providing organized units which leadership could mobilize and assert authority over, without having to directly administer them, opening up the political reach far beyond what a thin administrative apparatus could achieve (Mamdani, 2018; Simiyu, 2018).

Gendered Power Relations and Royal Women

Wanga political organization was also influenced by marriage alliances and the formal roles of royal women, an element that the scholarship has usually underestimated. The Nabongo's principle wives occupied important positions in the royal court as they were in charge of the management of tributes, royal estates, arbitration of disputes that involved women, and rituals, especially those involving agricultural fertility (Simiyu, 2018; Were, 1967). The queen mother, which is the mother of the reigning Nabongo, had certain influence as a primary advisor, mediator between royal factions and in some cases as an active political one during periods of succession.

Marriage alliances were the key to Wanga political expansion. By marrying off their daughters to other lineages in an area, the Nabongo established kinship relationships that served to shoring up the relations of tributary chiefdoms, making defection not only costlier, but also far more complicated politically. Likewise, marriages of Wanga royal women to allied leaders spread political influence by means of personal and genealogical connections. The genealogical tradition of association between Wanga and the Sakwa clan through Matar may reflect the historical memory of such alliances (consanguineous or affinal), which were later portrayed as genealogical relationships as the communities became different in language, culture and politics (Lonsdale, 2016; Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo, 2018).

Age Systems and Social Regulation

Age-set organisation, although less elaborate in Wanga society than among some neighbouring groups, in particular the Nandi and Kipsigis, was still important in the social regulation and political mobilisation of society. In turn, it complemented, rather than competed against the lineage and the royal structures that were at the centre of Wanga governance. Male initiation, organized at the lineage level but coordinated across much wider community networks, generated brigades of age-mates, of shared obligation, loyalty and common ceremonial identity. These age-cohorts transcended lineage boundaries giving rise to social solidarity that was higher (above) from the level of individual clans (Were, 1967; Ogot, 2015). They were also the source of organized human resources required to mobilize for military purposes, labor communal commitments and provide for enforcement of community norms where lineage authority was not adequate or was in conflict.

Age-set organization was a larger system of social discipline. Obligations proscriptions and behavioral expectations associated with each age grade construed a structure for regulation of individual behavior in the absence of central enforcement. Senior age grades exercised authority over junior ones and transitional initiation rituals reinforced expecting, or a distributed system of social control was created, based largely on internalized expectations and enforced by peers rather than formal legal sanctions. This distributed authority enhanced the leadership of the heads of lineages and the court of the Nabongo because fewer direct enforcement measures had to be taken and added to coherence and stability in political life in Wanga.

In sum, the interplay which included lineage, gender roles and age-set structures comprised the operational infrastructure of Wanga's governance. Political obligations were rooted in the context of day-to-day social relations through which the kingdom operated with a relatively small formal administration and adequate order, solidarity, and effective mobilization of resources throughout the community (Were, 1967; Ogot, 2015).

Colonial Mediation and Structural Transformation

Indirect Rule and Political Reconfiguration

When the British colonial government arrived in western Kenya in the 1890s they found the Wanga kingdom - a political formation that chimed well with the logic of indirect rule. As discussed by Lugard in 1893 in his dealings with Nabongo Mumia, British officials looked for African leaders who held recognised authority over substantial populations and territories and could act as a mediator for the collection of taxes, mobilization of labour and maintenance of social order. The Wanga kingdom with its existing tributary system, structures of a royal institution and the political skills of Mumia met these administrative needs. Granting the status of paramount chief to Mumia both acknowledged Wanga authority but also established an administrative position, a colonial one, that went beyond the authority of the precolonial kingdom.

The British expanded Mumia's area of formal authority to far beyond the boundaries of Wanga's past history and formed the North Kavirondo District. This unit contained communities to which there was no historical obligation to Wanga authority as they came to be subordinated to Mumia by colonial rather than indigenous political arrangements. This was a reorganization that changed the nature of the authority of the Wanga: this reorganization seemed to confirm and extend the power of the kingdom but in fact made that authoritydependent upon colonial endorsement rather than indigenous legitimacy. Mumia became answerable to the district commissioner, in Kakamega, instead of answerable to the councils of the Wanga lineages (Mamdani, 2018; Osamba, 2016). Colonial recognition therefore served to magnify and lessen the authority of the Wanga.

For newly subordinated communities, such as the Bukusu, Tachoni and Maragoli, the colonial period was a period of political imposition, as opposed to recognition of historical authority. Resentment at this arrangement caused long-lasting tensions that conditioned the patterns of inter-Luhya political relations into the postcolonial period. These tensions persist in the ways the Wanga authority and genealogical claims are remembered and disputed in present-day Kenyan politics as acceptance differs depending on each community's historical relation with the Wanga kingdom (Simiyu, 2018; Branch, 2011).

Recasting Kingship: Bureaucratisation of the Nabongo

The change of Nabongo authority under colonial rule was not just an extension of the territory and formal powers of authority, but a wholesale change in the way authority was exercised and justified. In the precolonial period, the Nabongo drew power from genealogical ancestry, ritual duties, military power, tribute accession and acknowledgement from the abakasa (senior lineage heads). Under colonial rule, the Nabongo also had to depend on a formal recognition from the British administration, including the payment of a salary, the receipt of written certificates of appointment to the position and access to colonial police and military forces and institutions that were not subject to consent from the community (Ranger, 2015; Mamdani, 2018). This dual source of authority, of indigenous ritual and colonial administration, resulted in a hybrid political form, which was more powerful because it commanded colonial resources, but in turn vulnerable because it was dependent upon colonial approval, which could be withdrawn.

Mumia handled this hybrid role proficiently, for his long tenure. At the same time he continued to exercise his authority as a traditional Nabongo among his own people but served in the capacity of a loyal colonial paramount chief for district administration. However, these dual responsibilities caused some tensions: what appeared necessary from a colonial administrative point of view may diminish his ritual authority, and what may have been made necessary to maintain indigenous legitimising may conflict with colonial expectations (Osamba, 2016; Lonsdale, 2016).

Colonial bureaucratisation also reshaped succession too. Administrators favored predictable transitions and intervened to head off disputes which disturbed governance. This strengthened patrilineal dynastic principle at the expense of the (collegial) selection of a ruler by the abakasa, limiting the political influence of senior heads of lineages. Over time, this resulted in a more formally dynastic Naboingship than was precolonial - a paradox in which the application of colonial rule enhanced ceremonial power while eviscerating most fundamental indigenous political functions (Were, 1967; Simiyu, 2018).

Long-term Institutional Consequences

Colonial intervention had significant and paradoxical long-term implications for the kingdom of the Wanga with far-reaching implications for Luhya political culture which continues to this day. On the one hand, the colonial expansion of the authority of Wanga people gave rise to the Naboingship: the institution that survived the end of colonial rule with symbolic legitimacy unusual among African traditional authorities. Unlike authorities developed solely by colonial administration, the Naboingship continued to have links with precolonial genealogical and ritual traditions, which lent it, and therefore it had historical and cultural legitimacy. This connection ensured that the institution would continue to be known as a meaningful cultural authority even after being stripped of its formal administrative powers at independence (Ogot, 2015; Osamba, 2016).

On the other hand, the process of colonial restructuring created enduring political grievances and institutional distortions. The subordination of Bukusu, Maragoli and other Luhya sub-groups to the paramountcy of the Wanga caused a lot of resentment, which were perceived to be collusion with colonial oppression. These grievances were never fully redressed following independence and returned with vengeance in postcolonial political competition. The colonial construction of Wanga authority as a Luhya-wide institution also complicated overall Luhya identity, injecting a hierarchical framework into a community that has had an organizational history based on lateral diversity and local autonomy rather than on a vertical organization of people who somehow owed their loyalty to a single paramount authority (Branch, 2011; Simiyu, 2018). These legacies persist in influencing internal Luhya politics and how historical Wanga identity is conceptualized and what use it will serve in contemporary Kenyan elections.

Comparative and Theoretical Discussion

Table 2: Comparative Political Structures among Selected Luhya Sub-groups

Analytical Criterion	**Wanga Kingdom**	**Bukusu Sub-group**	**Maragoli Sub-group**
Political Structure	Centralised monarchy — the Nabongo institution	Segmentary; lineage and clan councils	Segmentary; age-grade regulated
Basis of Leadership	Sacred kingship and patrilineal dynasty	Elder consensus; situational authority	Clan elders; non-dynastic
Succession Mechanism	Dynastic succession; patrilineal descent with collegial selection	Non-dynastic; consensual deliberation	Non-dynastic; consensual deliberation
Ritual Authority	High; Nabongo as sacred political centre with rain-making prerogatives	Dispersed among lineage ritual specialists	Dispersed; no centralised ritual figure

Military Organisation	Centralised court warriors supplemented by tribute-based levies	Age-set warriors; episodic mobilisation	Age-set warriors; episodic mobilisation
Territorial Control	Defined kingdom with tribute peripheries and contested frontiers	Fluid clan territories with overlapping claims	Fluid; lineage-defined land
Tribute / Taxation	Formalised tribute extraction from subordinate communities	Informal reciprocal exchange obligations	Informal reciprocal exchange obligations
Colonial Engagement	Proactive collaboration Mumia regime as paramount colonial chief	Variable; episodes of resistance	Variable; episodes of resistance
Post-colonial Legacy	Nabongo retains recognised symbolic and cultural authority	No equivalent institutional survival	No equivalent institutional survival

Table 2: Analytical comparison of political organizational features across selected Luhya sub-groups. The Bukusu and Maragoli are selected as representative of the predominantly segmentary majority among Luhya sub-groups. Sources: Were (1967), Simiyu (2018), Osamba (2016), Ogot (2015), and Reid (2017).

The comparative evidence presented in Table 2 is such as to show how the Wanga kingdom occupied a unique position in the political spectrum of the Luhya, but a uniqueness, nevertheless, of degree, of institutional elaboration rather than of fundamental structural type. As with most other sub-groups of the Luhya, the Bukusu and Maragoli organised political life largely through lineage councils, age-set structures and the power of elders, lacks the institution equivalent to that of the Nabongo and the institution of organised tribute network that it oversaw. The difference between the Wanga and these groups was not the presence or absence of political organization but rather that the Wanga concentrated the symbolic and co-ordinating authority in one central institution while other groups disbanded these functions among several penetrance related units with no apex authority.

The issue of whether the Wanga polity belongs to the category of state, chieftaincy or a combination of both of the two was much debated. Applying Herbst's (2014) criteria for African statehood territorial sovereignty, population control, extraction capacity and administrative reach the Wanga kingdom gives a very mixed picture. It had territorial claims, a system of tribute; it provided for coordinated administration under the abakasa network and the Nabongo court; and it had a standing military force to enforce territorial control. However, its administration did not extend far beyond the tribute network, the control of population was dependent upon the collaboration of lineage structures, and the territorial sovereignty was constantly claimed by neighbors such as the Nandi and Bukusu. On these grounds, then, the Wanga kingdom was neither a fully consolidated state nor even simply a chieftaincy, but something closer to what Vansina (2016) refers to as a "domain" a polity based around a royal capital with authority of gradually diminishing over peripheral areas - one based on tribute rather than direct administration.

This classification has much broader theoretical implications for the formation of African states. The case of the Wanga clearly demonstrates that political centralisation was not necessarily the outcome of cultural endowment or institutional genius in precolonial Africa, but came about through specific ecological resources, external military pressures and trade networks, and lineage political culture. Centralized authority arose where these provided an incentive and opportunity to coordinate on a hierarchical basis. Contrary to the views of Evans-Pritchard and Fortes (1940), who believed that centralised polities were exceptional, regional historical scholarship has now come to recognise that centralisation was both widespread and highly variable, and was a function of local conditions rather than any "exceptional" cultural characteristic (Reid, 2017; Lonsdale, 2016).

The Wanga kingdom is one (locally specific) illustration of this general African pattern of politics, where hierarchical coordination was the result of negotiated interaction between lineage, ritual, and military resources.

Colonial transformation helps to illustrate this point. As Mamdani (2018) and Ranger (2015) highlight, indirect rule did not merely preserve or distort existing political structures but rather actively invented hybrid forms by exaggerating certain indigenous aspects especially those useful for colonial administration while the rest were marginalised. In the case of the Wanga, this resulted in a political form which could be represented as a continuous precolonial monarchy and was actually heavily reworked by colonial intervention. This duality is not a occurrence in the historical record but an analytical thing: it indicates that the separation of "tradition" and "modernity" is historically made. Political institutions that seem ancient may in fact have significant innovations incorporated in them that are recent. Understanding this duality in the past is critical to an assessment of the Nabongo institution in history as well as to assessing modern political claims according to Wanga royal heritage as electoral legitimacy and coalition-building.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has demonstrated that the Wanga Kingdom was a multilayered and coherent political formation inside. Its stability and durability were due to the combination of ritual kingship, the rule of patrilineal lineages, military organisation and the exaction of tribute, all imbedded in a historically-grounded social order. The relative centralization of the kingdom in the broader Luhya political network was not an accident and imposed on them by others, rather it was the result of the internal processes of political centralization through migration, intercommunity exchange, and strategic adjustment. At the same time, there was a significant alteration in this structure by colonial intervention that increased the appearance of centralized authority, while it altered the internal logic of governance. Interpretations based either on too much Wanga exceptionalism or dismissing the kingdom as a colonial creation do not do justice to its empirical and conceptual complexity. The evidence indicates a much more complicated powers of view, that the Wanga polity had deep foundations and roots in precolonial times and that under colonial rule they had been reshaped to be both continuing with and different from the earlier forms.

On its own terms, the Nabongo institution was a kind of sacred kingship based on a combination of sources of legitimacy including genealogical seniority, ritual authority, military prestige and communal recognition based on council (such as the abakasa). While outwardly monarchical, the political authority was trusted and allotted in practice. Good governance depended on the cooperation of the royal court and the heads of lineages, who had their own local authority mediating between center and periphery. Colonial rule changed this balance by bureaucratizing the office of the Nabongo, widening the administrative rule beyond the traditional boundaries, and putting more emphasis on dynastic succession rather than collegial choice of office holders. The resulting political formation cannot be said to be "traditional" or "colonial"; rather it is a hybrid political formation in which ritual sovereignty and bureaucratic government were structurally intertwined (Were, 1967; Simiyu, 2018; Ogot, 2015).

The genealogical links between the Wanga royal lineage with the Sakwa clan among the Luo-speaking communities indicate the continuity of the political role played by historical memory. These traditions, developed in time of fluid identity in western Kenya, prove that genealogy is not only a record of descent but 'part of a political language with which alliances, obligations and legitimacy are expressed'. Their persistence in the political ambit of contemporary times indicates that precolonial political structures are still alive in the postcolonial spaces of negotiation and competition (Atieno Odhiambo, 2015; Cohen & Atieno Odhiambo, 2018; Lonsdale, 2016).

This study is a contribution to three related fields. It progresses the historiography of the Luhya from combining the oral traditions, archival records and political theory into an interpretive framework. It adds to the history of Kenya politics by locating institutional change in the history of the Wanga in wider processes of colonial state formation and postcolonial continuity. Finally, it has a place in the political anthropology of Africa, as it challenges this dichotomy between centralized states and segmentary societies and provides, instead, a framework of layered, negotiated and historically contingent power. Future research that integrates systematic

oral history with in-depth archival analysis will also develop how Wanga political structures have been re-created in successive historical periods (Mamdani, 2018; Ranger, 2015; Simiyu, 2018).

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