

TIMOTHY INSOLL

## MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE IN BUGANDA, UGANDA

Writing this short paper was prompted, first, by the alarming pace at which the destruction of earlier mosques is proceeding in Buganda, as they are replaced by new mosques built out of concrete in what is best termed the "Oriental" style; and, second, by the general absence of published material on the Islamic religious

architecture of Uganda or, indeed, of East-Central Africa as a whole.<sup>1</sup> The kingdom of Buganda lies within the present-day Republic of Uganda.<sup>2</sup> Encompassing Kampala, the capital of Uganda, it stretches along the northern shore of Lake Victoria for 200 miles, and for some distance inland (fig. 1). Buganda<sup>3</sup> was possibly the

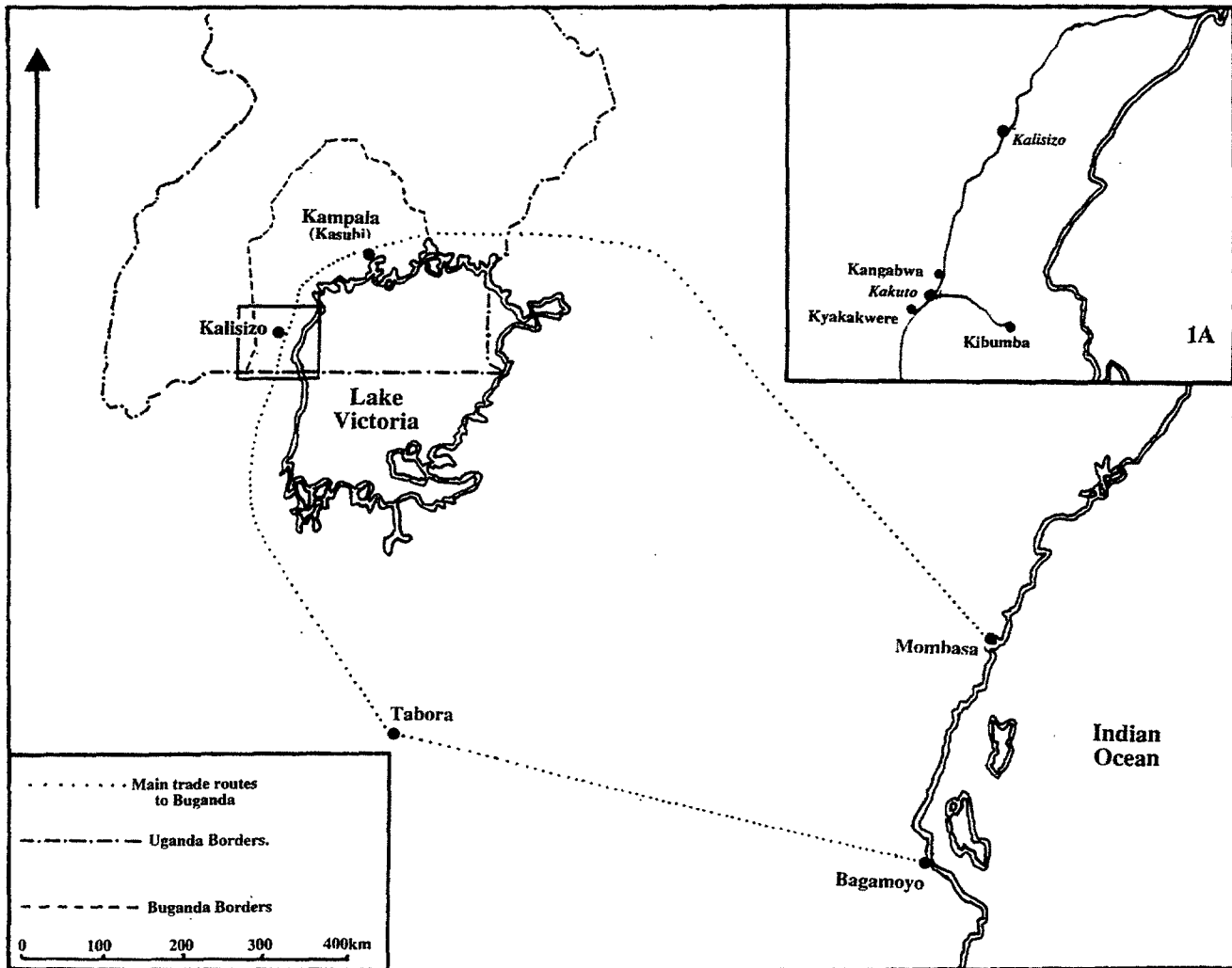


Fig. 1. Sketch map showing (1) position of Buganda within Uganda and (2) the 19th-century trade routes to Buganda. Inset A: Location of sites in Rakai District. (Map: adapted from J.S. Trimingham, *Islam in East Africa* [Oxford, 1964], p. 48; and A. Oded, *Islam in Uganda* [New York, 1974], map 4)

most powerful of the kingdoms which flourished in the inter-lacustrine region of East Central Africa, and which were visited by the first European explorers, including John Hanning Speke who reached this region in the mid-nineteenth century and provided us with an eye-witness account of life in Buganda at that time.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE ISLAMIZATION OF BUGANDA

Islam, the first "religion of the book" to reach the East African inter-lacustrine region,<sup>5</sup> was brought to Buganda by Arab and Swahili traders from the East African coast. These traders primarily sought slaves and ivory in the kingdom, along with a variety of miscellaneous commodities such as rhinoceros horn and animal skins. In return they exchanged trade goods such as beads, firearms, cloth, and metalwork.<sup>6</sup> The first recorded visit by an Arab trader to Buganda was in 1844, by Shaykh Ahmed ibn Ibrahim, a Wahabite<sup>7</sup> who related the events of his visit to Emin Pasha, the extraordinary German Muslim governor of Equatoria province in the Sudan in 1876.<sup>8</sup>

The route the Muslim merchants followed went inland from the East African coast to Tabora in what is now Tanzania, and then north around the western shore of Lake Victoria to Buganda, through the modern district of Rakai (fig. 1). It was during the reign of the Bagandan king (*kabaka*) Mutesa I (ca. 1856–84) that the first noticeable effects of both the presence of the Arab and Swahili traders and of Islam were seen in Buganda. Mutesa converted to Islam, yet continued to practice his traditional religion<sup>9</sup> and Oded makes the apt point that adherence to Islam during the reign of Mutesa was mainly expressed by imitating the traders' ceremonies.<sup>10</sup> The effects of Islamization, which were primarily felt in the capital, the court circle and the trade centers, were numerous. They included the building of mosques,<sup>11</sup> the introduction of soap and woven grass-mat manufacture, and of certain crops and vegetables, such as wheat, tomatoes, pomegranates, and pawpaws, alongside the adoption of the robe and turban, the introduction of reading and writing in Arabic, the use of Arabic and/or Swahili terms of greeting, and changes in royal burial customs.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 2. Kampala, Uganda. The modern Kasubi mosque.

Islamic influence on Buganda was also exerted from the north, via the Egyptian garrisons stationed in the southern Sudan, though in comparison to the influence of the traders from the East African coast this was on a limited scale and of negligible importance until the 1870's, when, Twaddle argues, a stricter form of Islam was introduced into Buganda by Sudanese teachers from Khartoum.<sup>13</sup>

In the later part of the nineteenth century, civil war in Buganda and increasing conflict between Arab traders and Christian missionaries in East Central Africa adversely affected the spread of Islam and lessened the influence of Muslim traders, a process begun in the mid-1870's when the enthusiasm of Mutesa I for Islam declined in the face of what he perceived to be a threat to his authority from the new religion.<sup>14</sup> In 1880 civil war broke out in Buganda, which led to the defeat of prince Mbogo, a claimant to the throne of Buganda and a prominent Muslim.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, between 1888 and 1890 there was a Muslim revolt in Uganda, directed against European Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, and European power.<sup>16</sup> In 1893, Buganda became a British protectorate, with other territory included by 1903. British rule was, in fact, to lead to the diversification of the Muslim community in Buganda, when the building of the railway into eastern Uganda in the early twentieth century led to an influx of Muslims into the area as Indian laborers, traders, and craftsmen began to arrive,<sup>17</sup> adding Isma'ili and Shi'a elements to the predominantly Sunni Muslim community of the Shafi school which already existed.<sup>18</sup> This was to have a further effect upon the Islamic religious architecture of Buganda.

In recent years, information on the Muslim community in Uganda has been difficult to obtain, as a result of the insecure situation resulting from the regime of Idi Amin and the ensuing civil war. Statistics for the mid-1960's, quoted by both Schacht and Trimingham, record that 44 percent of all Muslims in Uganda lived in Buganda, which then amounted to 8 percent of the total population of Buganda.<sup>19</sup> Schacht also mentions that at the time of his writing there were 4,506 mosques in the whole of Uganda, each supposedly with its own mullah.<sup>20</sup> By 1984 Muslims made up 6.6 percent of the total population of Uganda.<sup>21</sup>

During the early 1970's under the rule of Idi Amin, who was a Muslim, numerous conversions to Islam, accompanied by both large-scale modernization of old mosques and construction of new mosques took place in Kampala.<sup>22</sup> Possibly the most famous of these is the

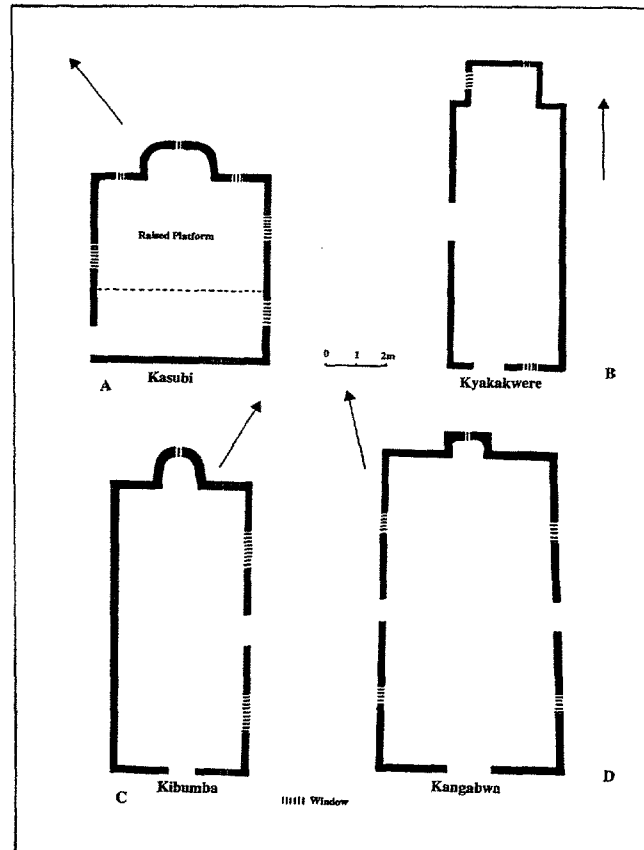


Fig. 3. Floor plans of the mosques: (A) the small Kasubi mosque; (B) Kyakakwere mosque; (C) Kibumba mosque; (D) Kangabwa mosque.

huge, unfinished mosque on Lugard Hill in Kampala, which stands with its crooked minaret as testimony to the Amin period.<sup>23</sup> This phase of mosque renovation and construction in the early 1970's was to have its influence in the rural areas of Buganda.<sup>24</sup>

#### CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

Historical data on the construction materials and techniques employed in mosque construction in Buganda are difficult to obtain. Until recently, however, it would seem that the most common material used was wattle and daub; brick was less commonly used — Oded states that an attempt to build a mosque of brick in the late nineteenth century failed because bricks could not be manufactured out of the locally available materials.<sup>25</sup> The wattle-and-daub mosques which were built resembled the type of house found in rural Swahili communities on the East African coastal mainland and off-shore

islands. Trimingham makes the cautionary point that the similarities between these two types of structure are so marked that the mosques are only really recognizable from the side with the protruding mihrab niche.<sup>26</sup>

The construction of a rural Swahili hut is described in detail by Prins. Briefly, it entailed building a wooden frame, usually of rectangular plan, from various sizes of poles — thicker at the corners, next to doors, and to support the roof — onto which the wooden rafters were added, the poles were thinner in between the supporting poles where latticework was built up for the walls.<sup>27</sup> The frame was then tied together with coir rope, as was the roof, which was made from either woven palm fronds or dry grass. The walls were then built up out of saplings, mud, and small stones.<sup>28</sup> It is probable that a similar construction sequence was followed during the erection of mosques in Buganda (see fig. 7 for an example of wattle-and-daub construction, albeit rather crude).

In contrast, the Buganda round house, the traditional indigenous habitation structure, was built from different materials in a very different manner. Work was begun from the top, with a central ring made from beaten palm fronds and papyrus reed, placed on three stakes driven into the ground upon which the roof, which was made out of reeds, was stitched with strips of black bark. The house pillars were then erected, and the roof rested on these so that it “slanted down rapidly from the three long pillars in the centre to the short pillars at the extreme outer circle of the house.”<sup>29</sup> The reedwork roof was then finished and extended down to the ground, except at the doorways, and thatched with a special broad-bladed reed until the roof was approximately 30cm thick. A hooded doorway, similarly built of reeds, a door stitched from reeds, and a beaten-earth floor were also added.<sup>30</sup> (See fig. 5 for an idea of what the finished house looked like from the exterior.)

#### URBAN AND RURAL MOSQUES

In an attempt to collect data on the type of mosques fast disappearing today, examples of both urban and rural mosques were examined. One urban and four rural structures are described below.

In Kampala, a small mosque located close to the Kasubi tombs was examined in September 1994 (fig. 3).<sup>31</sup> This mosque is of particular interest for three reasons: (1) it is located close to the Kasubi tombs, which are the burial place of Mutesa I, his son and successor Mwanga II, and Mwanga’s two successors,<sup>32</sup> and hence provides a contrast with these traditional animist mauso-

lea; (2) the reputed early date of the foundation of the mosque, which according to oral tradition was built in the late nineteenth century; and (3) the simplicity of its construction and form.

The small Kasubi mosque is not now used for prayer, as it has been superseded by a larger concrete and brick mosque built directly in front of it during the early 1970’s, in what is loosely termed the “Oriental” style (fig. 2). The small mosque was itself partially rebuilt at the same time, but only about 1m of the walls of the original structure remain, and upon these a modern brick building and a new corrugated iron roof have been erected, and the building is now used as a school.<sup>33</sup> The

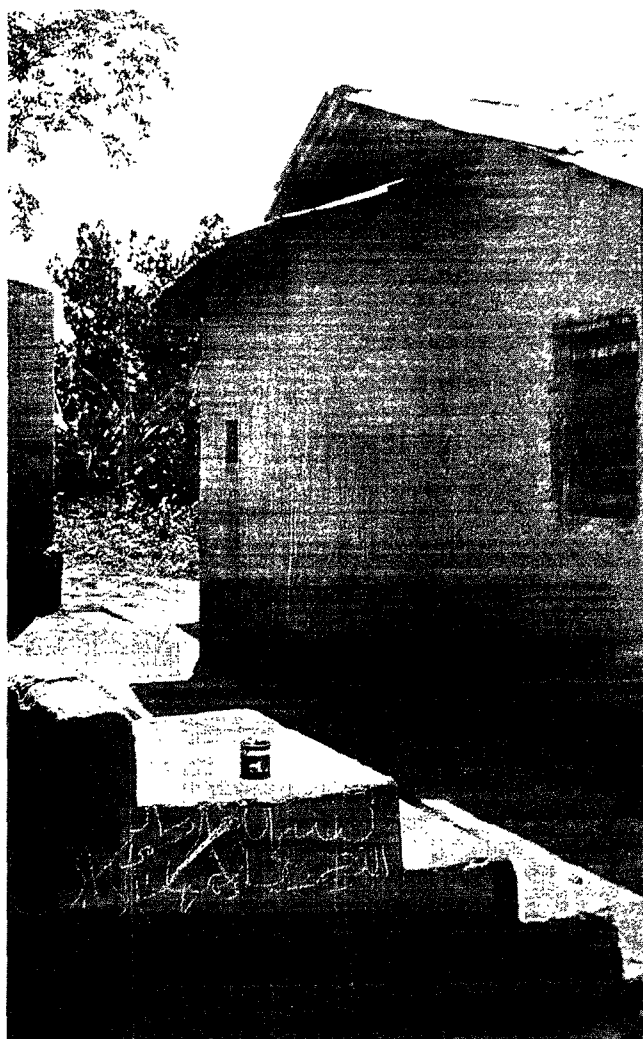


Fig. 4. Kampala, Uganda. Small Kasubi mosque. Qibla niche and minbar (?).

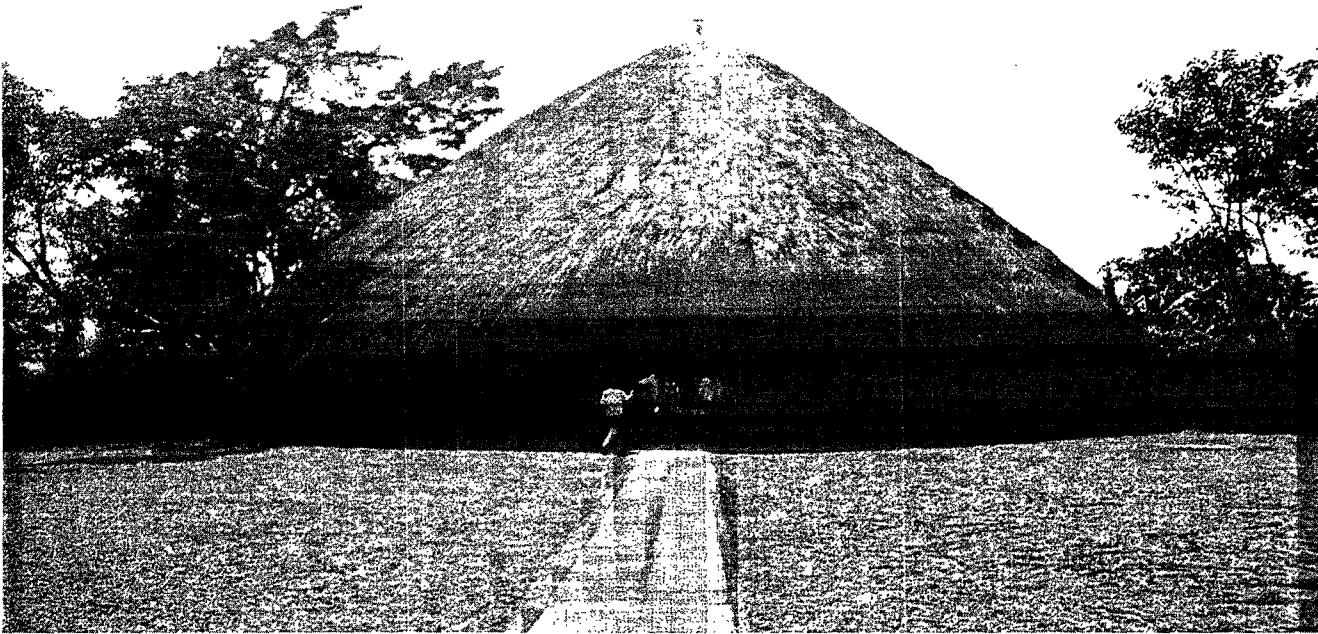


Fig. 5. Kampala, Uganda. Kasubi tombs. (Photo: Rachel MacLean)

plan of the mosque is still discernible, and the rectangular mihrab niche can be clearly seen (figs. 3 and 4). The floor in the half of the mosque containing the mihrab is raised about 10cm higher than the rest. What appears to be the minbar, a set of two steps, is found to the right of the mihrab. A flight of four steps, which were found isolated outside with no discernible function, would appear to have been used for the call to prayer (fig. 4). No trace of ablution jars set into the ground outside or of foot-cleaning stones were found, in contrast to the rural mosques described below.

The small Kasubi mosque, if oral tradition is correct, is one of the earliest surviving mosques in Kampala.<sup>34</sup> This type of small, simple mosque is now rare in the city, where they have been largely replaced with modern structures (such as the example in fig. 2). This type of structure is probably similar to the first mosques built by the Arab and Swahili traders when they arrived in Buganda. This mosque also provides a striking contrast with the neighboring Kasubi tombs, which are, as Kigongo Mugerwa states, the peak of architectural development in this region of Africa.<sup>35</sup> Representative of

the traditional architecture of the region, they are circular in plan and built of reeds, grass, and poles, as described above (fig. 5).

In the rural Rakai district, three mosques — at Kyakakwere, Kibumba, and Kangabwa — and one Qurʾan school at Kyakakwere were examined (figs. 1 and 3). The location of these structures is of interest, as the

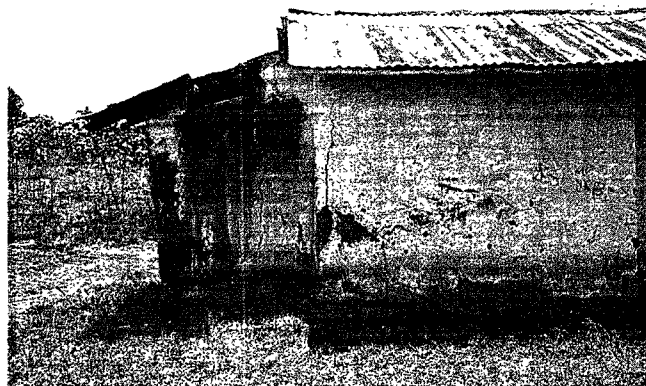


Fig. 6. Rakai District, Uganda. Kyakakwere mosque.

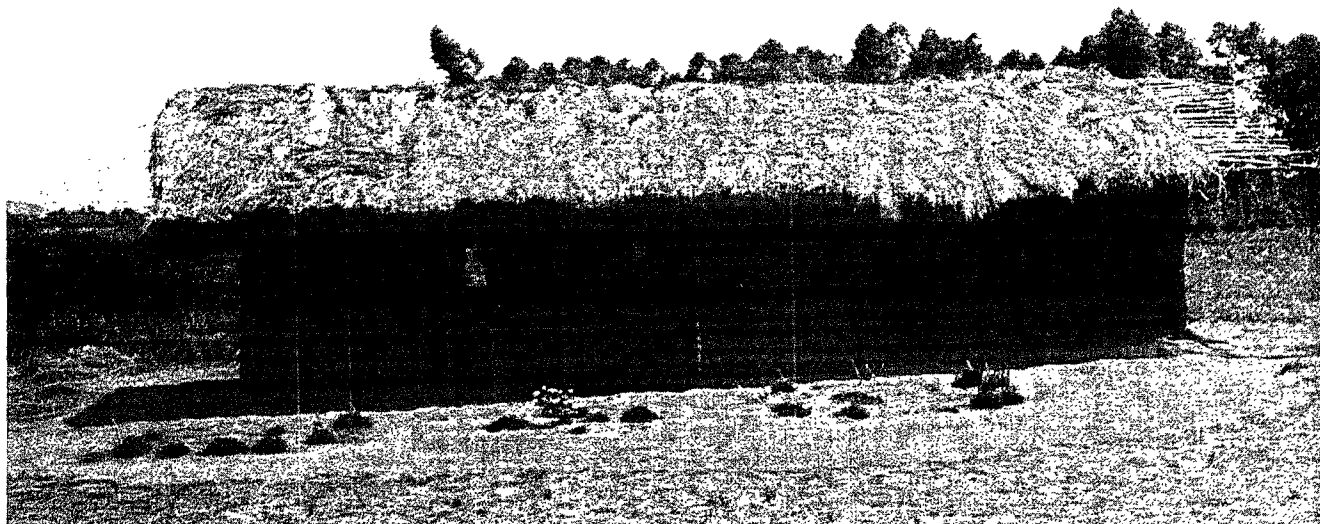


Fig. 7. Rakai District, Uganda. Kyakakwere Qur'an school.



Fig. 8. Rakai District, Uganda. Kibumba mosque.

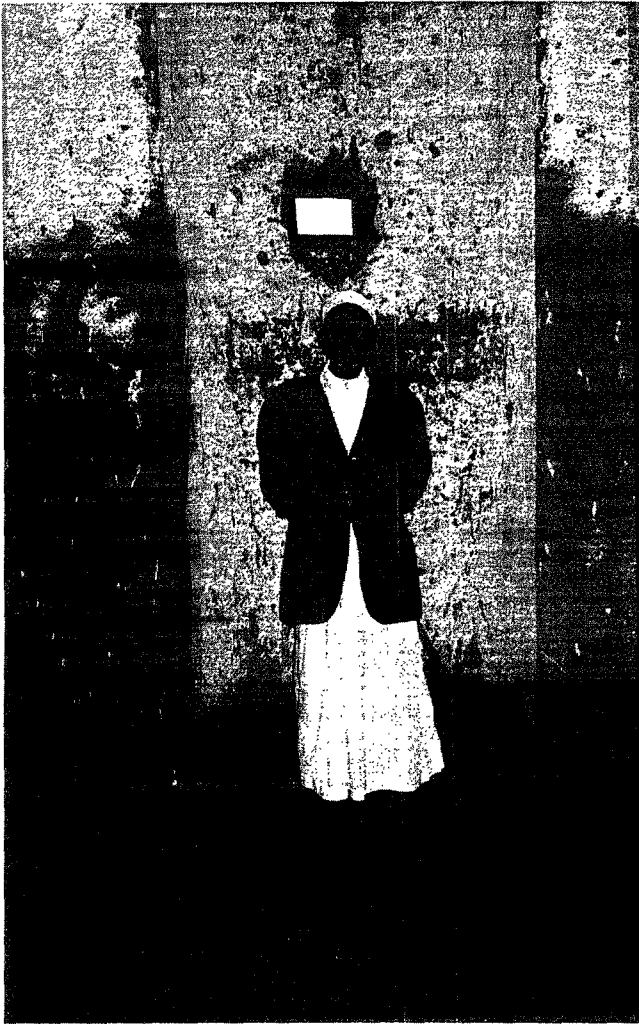


Fig. 9. Haji Muhammad Songo and the qibla of the Kimbumba mosque.

mosque and Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an school at Kyakakwere and the mosque at Kangabwa all lie along the trade route used by Muslim merchants traveling to the capital of Buganda in the second half of the nineteenth century (fig. 1). Although the structures which stand today do not date from this period, they are representative of the fast-disappearing style of wattle and daub and mud-brick mosques. The dates of foundation for the three mosques varies according to the informant, with each claiming their respective mosque as the first, with the other mosques being offshoots of their own. It is unlikely that any of them were built before 1941, the date given by an informant named Haji Muhammed Songo for the construction of the Kibumba mosque, which he witnessed.

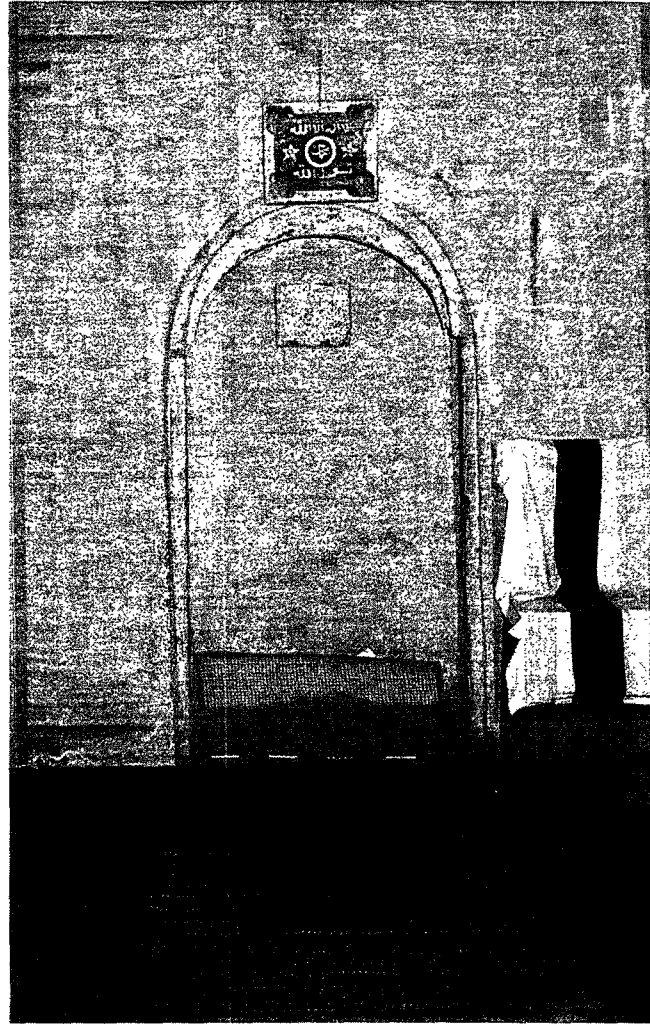


Fig. 10. Rakai District, Uganda. Kangabwa mosque. The qibla and minbar.

The construction materials used differ. The mosque and Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an school at Kyakakwere are built of wattle and daub. The Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an school was left undecorated; the mosque was finished with a coat of white plaster (fig. 6). The other two mosques, at Kangabwa and Kibumba, are built from mudbrick, with the Kanabwa mosque finished with a rendering of cement, and the qibla built from wattle and daub. All the structures were originally thatched, but only the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an school still has a thatched roof made of reeds and grass (fig. 7). All three mosques have been re-roofed with galvanized iron sheets, and Haji Songo told us that the thatch at Kibumba mosque was replaced with a tin roof in 1962.

The Kibumba mosque is the most elaborate structure: it is built on a rubble raft faced with dressed stone and

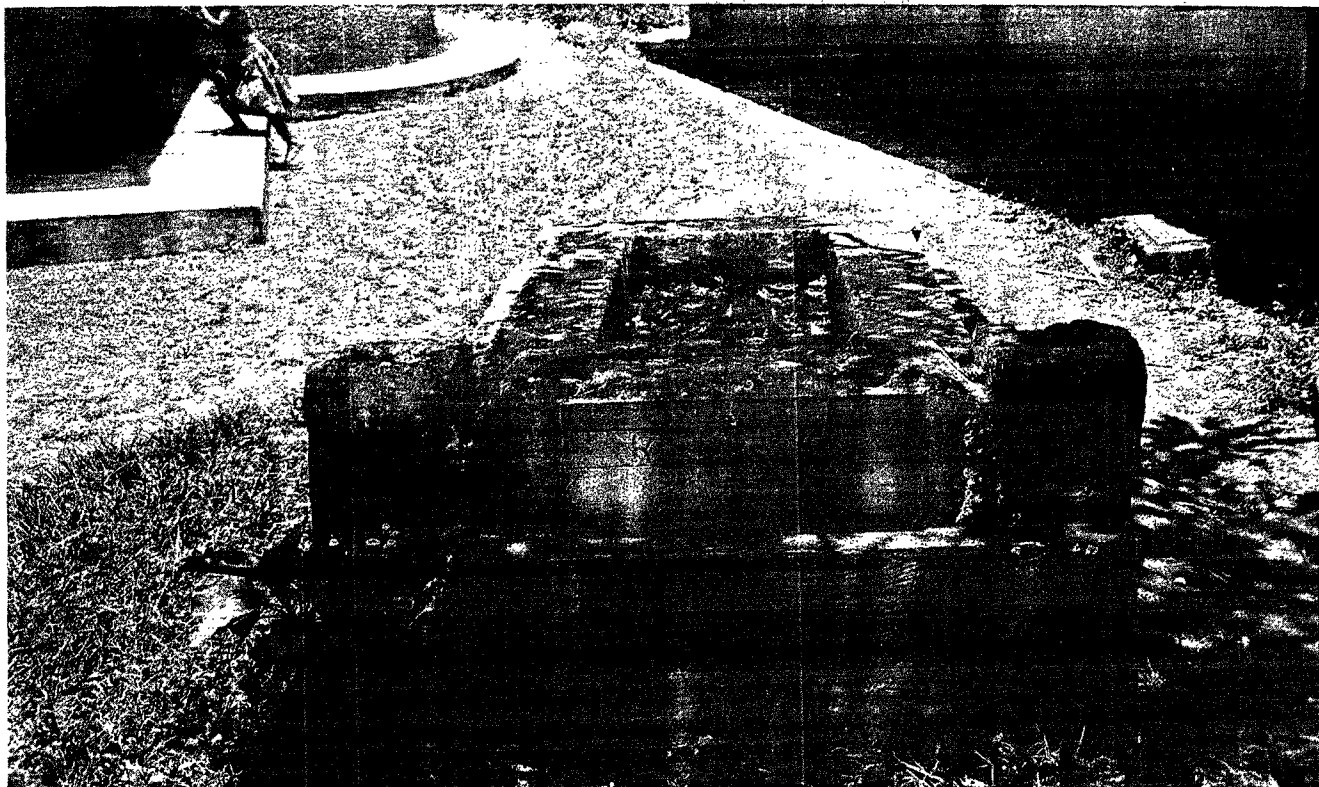


Fig. 11. Kampala, Uganda. Tomb at rear of Kawempe mosque.

uses fired-brick columns as an embellishment and a structural support for the overhanging two-tiered tin roof (fig. 8). It is also the only structure with a foot-cleansing stone still in situ, a feature known to be early in date. These single large stones were used to stand on while making one's ablutions prior to prayer,<sup>36</sup> and should not be confused with the stepping stones which are sometimes also present and which are used to gain entry to the mosque after washing. The Kyakakwere mosque lacked a cleansing stone but had a clay water pot set into the ground at the side of the qibla, which was also used for ablutions.

The qibla directions varied from northwest to northeast, approximately the correct alignment for the region.<sup>37</sup> The mihrabs also varied in shape, with rectangular examples found at Kyakakwere and Kangabwa, and a semicircular mihrab at Kibumba (fig. 9). The mihrab in the Kangabwa mosque was by far the most ornate, as it was decorated with cement molding in the form of a lip and an overhanging carved wooden panel, features not seen elsewhere (fig. 10). The doors, doorframes, and windows varied. In the Kyakakwere Qur'an school

they were extremely crude and consisted of the frames alone, which were made out of poles similar to those used in making the structural frame onto which the mud rendering was then applied (fig. 7). At Kibumba mosque, finished windowframes and doors had been fitted (fig. 8). Liturgical furniture was largely absent from the mosques, aside from the occasional folding stool used to keep the Qur'an off the floor, and the woven grass mats used as prayer mats and as a floor covering (fig. 10). The only minbar seen in Rakai district was in the Kangabwa mosque; it is reminiscent of the example in the small Kasubi mosque (fig. 10). Graves were not found around the mosques; the dead are usually interred in family plots situated in the fields surrounding the house. Exceptions are in Kampala, where space is at a premium and where some comparatively ornate tombs are found (fig. 11).

The fashion for the Oriental, or what Schacht terms "vaguely Indian," style mosques,<sup>38</sup> built of concrete and fired-brick with masonry embellishments, wrought-iron grills and fixed wooden minbars,<sup>39</sup> and occasionally with elaborately painted decoration, is now spreading to the



countryside of Buganda, albeit in a somewhat diluted form. It is a distinct possibility that the majority of the older-style mosques will disappear in the near future, to be replaced by these more modern buildings, as the older buildings are unfortunately not protected.<sup>40</sup> The Kyakakwere mosque, for example, is unlikely to survive in its present condition for long, and it is probably only a lack of funds that has saved it and others of these structures so far. These buildings offer an insight into the nature of the architecture of the first mosques founded in Buganda. If this information is lost, our understanding of the nature of early Islam in East Central Africa will surely be less complete.

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### NOTES

*Author's note.* I am grateful to Rachel MacLean for commenting on a draft version of this paper. The research for this article was carried out while working with M.R. MacLean in Rakai District, Western Uganda. Many thanks are offered to Mr. Wamala, the then director of the Uganda Antiquities Department and curator of the Uganda Museum, and to Ephraim Kamuhangire and Peter Bisasso, also of the Uganda Museum, for advice and practical help. Thanks are also offered to Bernard Guinan for assistance in the field and to the British Institute in Eastern Africa for logistical help.

- Limited descriptions of the mosque architecture found in Kampala and rural areas in Buganda are provided by J. Schacht in "Notes on Islam in East Africa," *Studia Islamica* 23 (1965): 91-136; and I.Z. Soghayroun, *The Omani and South Arabian Muslim Factor in East Africa: The Role of the Zanzibari and Swahili Traders in the Spread of Islam in Uganda* (Riyadh: Dar al-Ulum, 1984), pp. 187-88. However, neither scholar examines the structures in any detail, and Solzbacher is correct in lamenting that "virtually nothing has been published on the history of the Muslim community in Uganda" (R.M. Solzbacher, "Continuity through Change in the History of Kibuli," *Uganda Journal* 33 [1969]: 163-74).
- The kingdom of Buganda has been partially reinstated with the inauguration recently of a new *kabaka* or king.
- The name of the people inhabiting Buganda is the Baganda or simply Ganda; an individual is a Muganda; and the language Luganda, (R. Kigongo Mugerwa, *Kasubi Tombs* (Kampala: R.M.K. Associates, 1991), p. 1; N. King, A. Kasozi and A. Oded, *Islam and the Confluence of Religions in Uganda 1840-1966* (Tallahassee, Fla: American Academy of Religion, 1973), p. 1.
- See John Hanning Speke, *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (London: Blackwood, 1863).
- King et al., *Islam and the Confluence of Religions*, p. 54.
- On the trade between the Arab and Swahili traders and the Luganda, see Soghayroun, *The Omani and South Arabian Muslim Factor*, p. 28; A. Oded, *Islam in Uganda: Islamization through a Centralized State in Pre-colonial Africa*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), pp. 46-47; and J. Marissal, "Le Commerce zanzibarite dans l'Afrique des Grands Lacs au XIXe siècle," *Revue Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer* 65 (1978): 212-55.
- Marissal, *Le Commerce zanzibarite*, p. 232.
- See Sir John Gray, "Ahmed bin Ibrahim: The First Arab to reach Buganda," *Uganda Journal* 11 (1947): 80-97; and T.W. Gee, "A Century of Muhammadan Influence in Buganda, 1852-1951," *Uganda Journal* 22 (1958): 139-50.
- Low defines the traditional focus of religious attention in Buganda as "a pantheon of instrumental gods — of war, of health, of thunder and so on." Each of these gods was the responsibility of a clan who provided the priests and mediums of the god; see D.A. Low, *Buganda in Modern History*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 18. For further information on Baganda traditional religion, see J. Roscoe, *The Baganda* (London: Macmillan, 1911), pp. 271-345, and for a description of Baganda ritual objects and paraphernalia, see Kigongo Mugerwa, *Kasubi Tombs*, pp. 13-17.
- Oded, *Islam in Uganda*, p. 305.
- The most important mosque was in the Kabaka's enclosure, and a new mosque was constructed each time the royal household moved, as it periodically did; Oded, *Islam in Uganda*, p. 69.
- See Oded, *Islam in Uganda*, pp. 72-96; Soghayroun, *The Omani and South Arabian Muslim Factor*, pp. 145-49, 193; Marissal, *Le Commerce zanzibarite*, pp. 232-33. Traditionally, the king's jawbone was removed during the mourning period, decorated, and placed separately in a jawbone shrine for worship. This custom was forbidden by Mutesa I, perhaps as a direct result of the teachings of Arab merchants (Kigongo Mugerwa, *Kasubi Tombs*, p. 3; Oded, *Islam in Uganda*, p. 73).
- M. Twaddle, *Kakungulu and the Creation of Uganda* (London: James Currey, 1993), p. 24. The effects of Islamic influence from the north upon Buganda are also briefly mentioned by E.B. Haddon, in "Uganda," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 4: 991-93.
- Twaddle, *Kakungulu*, p. 25.
- Schacht, *Notes on Islam in East Africa*, p. 93.
- Soghayroun, *Omani and South Arabian Muslim Factor*, p. 72.
- Mangat records that the majority of the laborers used in building the Uganda Railway were Muslims from the Punjab, Bombay, Sindh, Baluchistan, and the North-Western Frontier districts. For a detailed analysis of the composition of the Asian Muslim community in Buganda, see J.S. Mangat, *A History of the Asians in East Africa, 1886 to 1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 38-39; and King et al., *Islam and the Confluence of Religions*, pp. 25-27.
- Schacht, *Notes on Islam in East Africa*, p. 92; Soghayroun, *Omani and South Arabian Muslim Factor*, pp. 167-68.
- See Schacht, *Notes on Islam in East Africa*, p. 91; and J.S. Trimmingham, *Islam in East Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1964), p. 48.
- Schacht, *Notes on Islam in East Africa*, p. 93. He further makes the point that the term *mullah* is influenced by the Swahili *Mwalimu*, which equals the Arabic *mu'allim*.
- M. Hiskett, *The Course of Islam in Africa* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), p. 168.
- Marissal makes the interesting point that during the Amin period there was "une reprise de l'expansion de l'Islam en Uganda, commencée dans les trois dernières décennies du XIXe siècle et interrompue sous le protectorat britannique" (*Le Commerce zanzibarite*, p. 234).

23. There was something of a backlash against Islam and Muslims in general following the end of the Amin period in the late 1970's.
24. I am grateful to Peter Bisasso of the Uganda Museum in Kampala for his comments on Islam in Buganda in the past two decades.
25. Oded, *Islam in Uganda*, p. 185. Fired mudbricks are widely made in Buganda today, and brick kilns are a common sight in the landscape.
26. Trimingham, *Islam in East Africa*, p. 83. This is correct as regards Swahili communities and where rectangular or square house plans predominate, but is obviously not so much of a problem where round houses are still being used.
27. The use of a rectangular plan was in itself a radical innovation in this region in the nineteenth century (I am grateful to John Sutton for this comment).
28. A.H.J. Prins, *The Swahili-Speaking Peoples of Zanzibar and the East African Coast* (London: International African Institute, 1967), pp. 77-78.
29. Roscoe, *The Baganda*, p. 371.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 369-76.
31. Unfortunately it only proved possible to pace out the plan of the small Kasubi mosque rather than measure it precisely. Hence the plan shown in figure 3A, though representative, is not entirely to scale. All the other figures are to scale.
32. Kigongo Mugerwa, *Kasubi Tombs*, p. 3.
33. The tin roof replaced a previous one made of thatch.
34. I am grateful to Remigio Kigongo, the keeper of the Kasubi tombs for information on the mosques in the area.
35. Kigongo Mugerwa, *Kasubi Tombs*, p. 7.
36. These stones, which are usually not worked in any way, would also appear to have functioned as a sign of Muslim identity. Oded recounts that during the reign of Mutesa I many of the inhabitants of Buganda placed these stones in front of their houses, and if the Kabaka wanted, "to check if his subjects were performing their prayers regularly, he would send his inspectors to examine if they had the stones before their courtyards," thereby leading to the situation where most people put stones in front of their houses in an attempt to guarantee their security; see Oded, *Islam in Uganda*, p. 70; King et al., *Islam and the Confluence of Religions*, p. 6; and Soghayroun, *The Omani and South Arabian Muslim Factor*, p. 187, for detailed descriptions of the function and meaning of these stones.
37. A point made by Oded is of interest in this context; he mentions that when a party of Egyptians arrived at the court of Mutesa I they found that the royal mosque was facing in the wrong direction. On their advice it was changed to point northeast. (*Islam in Uganda*, p. 69). Twaddle (*Kakungulu*, p. 24) further states that a division among Baganda Muslims occurred in the 1870's when a shaykh from the Sudan criticized mosques that were built facing west. This conflict over mosque orientation was symptomatic of the "stricter Islam" that was appearing in Buganda at that time.
38. Schacht, *Notes on Islam in East Africa*, p. 97.
39. Schacht recorded the existence of fixed wooden minbars in the Friday mosques on Kibuli Hill, Wandegeya, and Nakasero, all in Kampala (*Notes on Islam in East Africa*, p. 97).
40. It is a hopeful sign that a measure of protection has recently been given to other early religious buildings in Uganda, including the Catholic mission at Villa Maria which dates from the nineteenth century. See M. Posnansky and C.R. DeCorse, "Historical Archaeology in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review," *Historical Archaeology* 20 (1986): 1-14.