2019

History of Centralization and Kingship in Sub-Saharan-Africa

Ibrahim Kante
Longwood University, ibrahim.kante@live.longwood.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.longwood.edu/omni
Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.longwood.edu/omni/vol1/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Longwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Omnipedia Review by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Longwood University. For more information, please contact hamiltonma@longwood.edu, alwinehd@longwood.edu.
History of Centralization and Kingship in Sub-Saharan-Africa

Ibrahim Kante  
Longwood University

Introduction

Rwanda, a small land-locked country, has a very long and complex history, dating back to the precolonial period. Unlike most Sub-Saharan countries, numerous anthropologists and scholars have dedicated their time to uncovering and preserving Rwanda’s history. They have provided solid research and new interpretations on a topic filled with controversy over its social structure. Given the richness of the historical literature, Rwanda will serve as a case study for an analysis of the history of centralization and kingship in Sub-Saharan-Africa.

The focus on political centralization is paramount in this study. First, every constitutional government, to a variable extent, necessitates centralization to operate properly. Even the central/federal power needs to exert authority over its decentralized constituencies. Therefore, the history of centralization reinforces more knowledge on current governmental systems. More importantly, this study is even more significant in the light of understanding the formation and the consolidation of early civilizations and the political customs of the modern day. In this regard, the impetus for this research on the African Great Lakes region is in no way synonymous to regionalism. Rather, it emanates from the discovery of avenues of research that can nourish knowledge about interethnic processes and highlight the establishment of a particular centralized political structure endemic to precolonial Rwanda. The ability of the Nyiginya Kingdom to form a centralized monarchy and even its history of oppression are indicative of its ability to survive and prosper in a region where other kingdoms struggled and floundered.

This study will add to the literature of ancient civilizations by utilizing the Nyiginya Kingdom as a reference point for centralized kingdom-statehood in Sub-Saharan Africa. From the well-administered nobility to the local traditional institutions, this study will present a comparative argument proving the particular significance of this monarchy in the formation of early centralized governments. As such, this hypothesis will be developed further in a comprehensive essay starting with a brief contextual presentation of the situation. Next, the academic literature on the topic will be analyzed. Finally, a thorough exploration of historical events will present a favorable argument about the importance, past and present, of the political structure of the Nyiginya Kingdom.

Historical Context

Before discussing the creation of the kingdom, one must be familiar with the historical context of the birth of this centralized kingship and unprecedented political system in precolonial African history. Central Rwanda, where the Nyiginya Kingdom originated, is a region consisting of hills surrounded by rivers and marshes. Most historians agree that the first Rwandans were hunters and gatherers. The early archeological traces of habitation in central Rwanda and its first settlements were very sporadic. Following the Bantu Migration (c. 1000 A.D.), groups of farmers installed themselves in the rich volcanic soil of central Rwanda. Over time, nearly every hill was progressively populated between the 15th and 17th centuries (Mackintosh)

The main subsistence activities were farming and cattle herding: “The early excavations teach us that these people cultivated sorghum, finger millet, smelted iron, and owned at least some bovid cattle.” (Rugumba). Rwandan agriculturalists understood the importance of farming since it produced the essential food for the population. With an innovative agricultural system, including crop rotation and manuring, they were able to grow more crops and diversify their products (Schoenbrun). This ultimately encouraged population growth. Herding was also very popular, especially among the Nomadic Hima of southern Uganda and northern Rwanda. More than farming, which could be performed individually or in a family, cattle herding was very labor intensive. It required several teams of people in charge of different tasks, ranging from preparing pastures to milking.
Consequently, pastoral communities formed and distinguished themselves from the farmers. As population density grew, frictions between the two groups increased. Those disputes needed a resolution mechanism. In this context, social structures started to emerge and, according to Vansina, “in a densely inhabited district, the political structures dictated the way the land was exploited” (Vansina, Antecedents).

The first level was the family (Irungo), which was led by the patrilocal head of the household. Already, social status was dictated by gender, age, and wealth. In traditional Rwanda, cattle numbers were the main currency for social payments. Thus, by default, more cattle meant more wealth; albeit, iron and hoes retained some wealth value. To increase their influence and collective security, groups associated themselves, on the basis of kinship, to form clans (Imirango). The notion of clan was very mutable, like a modern-day treaty, wherein one clan could join or leave the coalition as they saw fit. Accordingly, the ruling clan was the natural result of the balance of power of the period and of the region. According to Kagame (1972) (Kagame), at this time seven major clans had emerged before the Nyiginya era.

At this point, political entities formed around this system of kinship. In this respect, 15-16th century Rwanda was divided into small statelets (Ibubugho) controlled by a king (Mwami). The Royal authority had a spiritual role over its constituency and was symbolized, amongst other valuable objects, by the royal drum (Karinga) and the dynastic bull. With the help of the ritualists, they were in charge of preserving and performing a series of royal rituals aimed at maintaining the prosperity of the mwami’s subjects, thereby, legitimizing his authority. In this perspective, Ruganzu Ndori officially founded the Nyiginya Kingdom symbolized by his dynastic drum Karinga. He surrounded himself with a prestigious army and was able to expand through territorial conquests (Vansina, Antecedents).

Literature Review

In an attempt to uncover the history of precolonial Rwanda, the variety of materials and documentation from historians offers more resources for a comprehensive understanding of the region and its history. However, in the case of Rwanda, this same principle led to a multitude of publications leading to different directions. The reasons for that is the different interpretations of historical events. That is why this paper will first uncover the literature on how historians conceptualize the “right way” to understand Rwanda’s history before analyzing a complementary literature review on the development of political centralization in the region.

Jan Vansina, in Antecedents to Modern Rwanda, criticizes early missionary historians and authors for their simplistic synthesis of Rwanda’s history (Vansina, Antecedents). Indeed, he reveals that much of Rwanda’s history was collected from civil servants and courtiers in the court of the Nyiginya kingdom, who were “ideologues in charge of giving a meaning to history and elaborating the officials version of its details” (Vansina, Antecedents). He exposed many prior misconceptions and orthodoxies about Rwandan history, and the Nyiginya Kingdom in particular. While being a fervent skeptic of the so-called lessons of the past, he recognized the undeniable link between Rwanda’s past and its present context, calling this the collective memory”. Yet, how static or malleable is that “collective memory?” Herein lies the major problematic issue with the rest of the literature on this topic. On this note, Phillip Cantrell makes a compelling argument about the necessity of understanding Rwanda through its culture of revisionist history (Cantrell). Given the ability of “those who hold power” to control the narrative and justify their actions through historical precedents, Cantrell suggests more intellectual interrogations are needed when exposed to the history of precolonial Rwanda.

Jan Vansina followed through in another publication, exploring the conceptual comprehension of the precolonial Rwanda (Vansina, L’évolution). He persisted on this idea of contextual understanding. Not only must we consider the tormented relations between the kingdom and the peripheral societies, but also the internal conflicts that divided the royal court. For him, nothing matters more for understanding the history of Rwanda than to get rid of a linear conception of its evolution. Therefore, we see a gap between historical facts and from historical recounts that can be shaped by contextual realities. It is, as he suggested, by measuring the gap that separates them in time and space, while considering the motives underlying them, that the history of the kingdom becomes more intelligible. This explanation reveals the old cliché of perspectives (two side of the story) present in most of world history, and Rwanda certainly isn’t immune to it. Vansina expanded even more on the necessity of an accurate historical methodology, particularly for gathering and analyzing oral traditions (Vansina, J. Oral Tradition). His detailing of the individual strength of various témoignages (testimonies) is helpful.
to both historians or anyone that wishes to record an historical event. These accuracy-assessment methods, like compared genealogy, allowed him to identify the contextual forces that might have molded the story and thereby, determining the reliability of those oral recounts.

According to Rene Lemarchand, traditional Rwanda can best be thought of as mixture of two distinctive types of situations: “a situation of optimum functional integration characterized by caste structure and a situation of ethnic coexistence.” Based on a Weberian analysis of functional societies, he posited that “traditional Rwanda was not a single social aggregate but rather an amalgam of two distinctive societies interacting with each other in different ways and at different levels” (Lemarchand).

David Newbury also opposes the view that presents Rwanda as a product of a unitary system (Newbury, “Precolonial Burundi”). In fact, he claims that on top of the precolonial configurations of the society, local factors and regional influences have generated different interpretations applied to the political practices of the period. Consequently, the variety of approaches to Rwanda’s history is the result of prioritization of different primary sources depending on the region, the time period, and the keepers of such traditions. While these different sources do not necessarily refer to diametrically opposed events or practices, the narratives drawn from them can be wildly different based on the approach. For him, “Deep immersion into a narrowly defined field of selective sources carries the risk of accepting assertion over analysis.” (Newbury, “Canonical Conventions). He suggested that these approaches can be universalized by a comprehensive analysis of the historiography drawn off the empirical records. He also noted that despite the “broad range of methodological innovations” on African historiography, there still hasn’t been an established “coherent conceptual apparatus” (Newbury, “Canonical Conventions).

In his attempt to verify the meaning of the social practices of the kingdom for the current Rwanda, Servilien Sebasoni presents Rwanda as receptacle of meaningful institutions and traits (Sebasoni). According to him, those specific institutions and traits were endemic to the Nyiginya Kingdom yet revealing of the similarities of the kingdom and other hegemonic entities. In that regard, he claimed that just like the West, the kingdom affirmed its superiority through its institutions and through its values. So, when the west creates the school or the Church, the Nyiginya nobility instead proposes a mythical imagery of the king as the keystone of the social fabric, the cattle as socio-political currency, and the stratification of society along vocational or hereditary clan lines. These aspects signify the very centralized power of the kingdom. He continues on by adding that those tools were indicative of the prestige of the ruling class “in control of culture, the organization of the nation (the Cattle and the Clientelist institutions), and the monopolization of the social discourse” (Sebasoni).

Helen Codere sees the Rwandan kingdom as a relation of power between the actors of a very stratified society (Codere). Not power as just that of a sovereign on his people but rather as a subjugation of a class ruling minority over the majority. This power relation was revealing of the ability of kingdom to concentrate and consolidate power in the hands of an elite class because even “Constant power struggles among the Tutsi did not break their monopoly of power as a group or diminish its effectiveness” (Codere). For her, the Tutsi minority (in power) subjugated the Hutu majority by the application of forcible measures of submission like the 
"Ububake and Ururweta institutions.

**Narrative of Centralization in Rwanda**

In the study of African politics, the behavior of the successive authorities often become replicas of the rotten system they sought to abandon. In a sense, we witness a never-ending cycle of turmoil painted with a different brush, sectarian or religious. That is why uncovering the roots allows the understanding of the political culture of a people. In the case of the Rwandan kingdom, as Vansina pointed out, “Over the course of almost three quarters of a century (1720 – 1796), kings and the elite at the court succeeded in creating a centralized kingdom” (Vansina, *Antecedents*). That centralization is demonstrable through several attributes that are also consistent with other great kingdoms and civilization of human history.

There are, indeed, some evidentiary factors that establish Rwanda as reference for centralized system in Sub-Saharan Africa. It first started with Ndori (c.1650) (Vansina, *Antecedents*) who conquered and consolidated the kingdom under one single authority: HIM! The Nyiginya kingdom was expanding and needed a stronger grip on the newly conquered population. The training and the deployment of permanent professional
armies was subsequently introduced. Their army distinguished itself from the other kingdom in the region through their hereditary conscription (Vansina, J. Antecedents). It permitted the early training and strict discipline other soldiers, similar to the Janissaries of the Ottoman empire ("Janissaries").

Power in Rwanda, during the emergence of the Nyiginya Kingdom, was defined by the sole authority of the king (Kagame). The king is the supreme chief in possession of everything. Authority derives entirely from the king. It is then distributed between the different chiefs: chief of the hill, the chief of the soil, the chief of the cattle and the chief of the armies (ibid). Contrary to what we might believe, this delegation of the king’s authority played in favor of the centralizing power of the king because it presented the king as the balance that holds all of this together. This idea was successful through a spiritual legitimization of the king.

Just like the mandate of heaven in China, the Caliphate in ancient Islamic civilization, or the divine right of medieval European kings, the ruling clan in Rwanda was able to cultivate this God-like trait of the king. For them it was the cult of Gihanga, a mythical character that was said to have fell from the sky and ruled over the entire Great Lakes Region (Vansina, J. Antecedents). He was therefore considered to be the link between God and the Humans (dynastic poems). His legacy has been used as the pristine Rwanda by his successors who used him to legitimize their reign.¹ Through this myth, the ruling clan was able to persuade the members of Rwandan society that the king not only ceased to be from his original clan, but also ceased to be a man as soon as he sat on the throne (Sebasoni).

Such portrayal of the king was necessary both for the consolidation of power and the Social cohesion (Sebasoni). In a society where ethnic relations were very stratified, it was opportune to have a figure head linking every clan together. Every vocational role in the society (farmers or herders) under his guardianship carried out through the performance of rituals, and the general acceptance that he was the owner of all proprieties (Cult of Gihanga) and that he was the order rectifier. Naturally, the subjects were taught to venerate the symbols of the monarchy like the royal Drums, the Hoe and the royal Cow.

Additionally, this mythical “propaganda” laid the foundation for the main institution of traditional Rwanda which has defined ethnic relations in Rwanda: the clientelism (Umubake) of the cattle. A man without a cow would offer his services (military or labor assistance) to a possessor of cows who made him his client by giving him the usufruct. The boss then guaranteed his client’s protection and participation in social prestige. Unlike the European decentralized feudal system, however, this system was rather “a feudal regime of extreme centralization” because of the oppressive land clientelism (Uburweta) (LeMarchand, "Political Instability"). This institutionalization of the chore in the second half of the nineteenth century will further stratify relations between the actors of an already divided society between powerful and powerless. “From now on,” wrote Vansina, “the terms Hutu and Tutsi will mean above all a situation of class or dependency or an occupation, but an absolute status” (Vansina, Antecedents).

Similarly, the regime was able to solidify its control over the conquered territories (of Ndori) by controlling “the means of production”, notably cattle and land. With every new conquest, Gisanura, and the later successors of Ndori, seized the herds of their new subjects. The ruling class would then employ the same clientelism system to ensure the acceptance of the king’s authority over all the cattle and the land of the kingdom. This clientelism was also applied to army chiefs as a tax (interore) to ensure loyalty (Vansina, J. Antecedents). As a result, these practices reasserted the divine view of the king as proprietor and provider of everything.

Moreover, the growing economy of the kingdom based on agriculture and pasturage has compelled an organization of the society through indigenous governing structures. The king was able to fortify a noble elite as his counsel to advise him, particularly on dispute resolutions. Indeed, the counsel created a very rudimentary judicial system known as “Gacaca” to resolve conflicts in the kingdom by holding head of households accountable for the actions of any family member (Lingnau). Besides, the dynasties enjoyed relative stability after the establishment of the queen mother as an institution to avoid succession turmoil. She was selected, by the king and the ritualist council, among the four main lineage to be the mother of the future king (Vansina, Antecedents).

¹ Some historians still believe on the true existence of this character, while many others, like Jan Vansina, presented the story around him as a “fairytale” (see Antecedents to Modern Rwanda, Appendix 2).
Another evidence of the singularity of the Nyiginya kingdom is the conclusion of the Hamitic hypothesis by early historians of Rwanda. They supposed an inherent superiority of the ruling class (Tutsi) that trace their ancestry back to Ham, the rejected son of Noah. This Hamitic hypothesis emanated from the social Darwinism of the colonial era and justified the vilest racist acts on the African continent. Yet, and according to their hierarchical structure, “Hamitic people” were still considered to be remnants of “civilization” on the continent and were naturally fit to establish a political structure and rule over the rest of the people. Therefore, for the Europeans, this was a way to acknowledge the particularity of certain kingdoms or societal formations. Kingdoms like the Nyiginya (Rwanda) and Buganda (Uganda) Kingdoms were considered the exceptions that confirm the rule (Wrigley).

To conclude, the Nyiginya kingdom presents itself as a model of centralization for the formation of early political entities in Sub-Saharan. Through a very pyramidal structure, the ruling class was able to exert their dominance over the majority, yet marginalized segment of the population. Uncovering the political history of Rwanda teaches us their proclivity to form a very stratified society. Indeed, the country has been struggling with creating a cohesive social fabric. Despite their familiarity with institutional aspects of centralization and order, their history reveal a pattern of oppression because these institutions have been used to serve anyone who could assert their authority. In fact, their form of centralization has been distorted into an authoritarian one ready replicate their cycle of oppressive unitary rule. Based on that observation of rigid rule, the history of societal classification along ethnic lines, and the legacy of colonialism, this research highlighted numerous structural factors that explain the system of tribal politics that gets embedded in current political systems in Sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, any institutional reform towards a liberal democracy in the region will require a blend with political history of each nation.
Works Cited


Kagame, A. Le Code des Institutions Politiques du Rwanda Précolonial. (1952)


Rugamba, C. La poesie face a l'histoire :cas de la poesie dynastique Rwandaise. Butare, Rwanda : INRS, 1987


