

# THE INVENTION OF TRADITION IN COLONIAL AFRICA

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# BRINGING AFRICANS INTO THE TRADITIONS OF GOVERNANCE

Two ways in which Europeans sought to make use of their invented traditions to transform and modernize African thought and conduct:

1. Acceptance of the idea that some Africans could become members of the governing class of colonial Africa
2. Was an attempt to make use of what European invented traditions had to offer in terms of a redefined relationship between leader and led.



# BRINGING AFRICANS INTO THE TRADITIONS OF GOVERNANCE

Best illustration of first idea – that some Africans might be turned into governors by exposure to British neo-tradition – is perhaps the famous school, King's College, Budo, in Uganda.

King's College was built on the Coronation Hill of the Baganda kings.



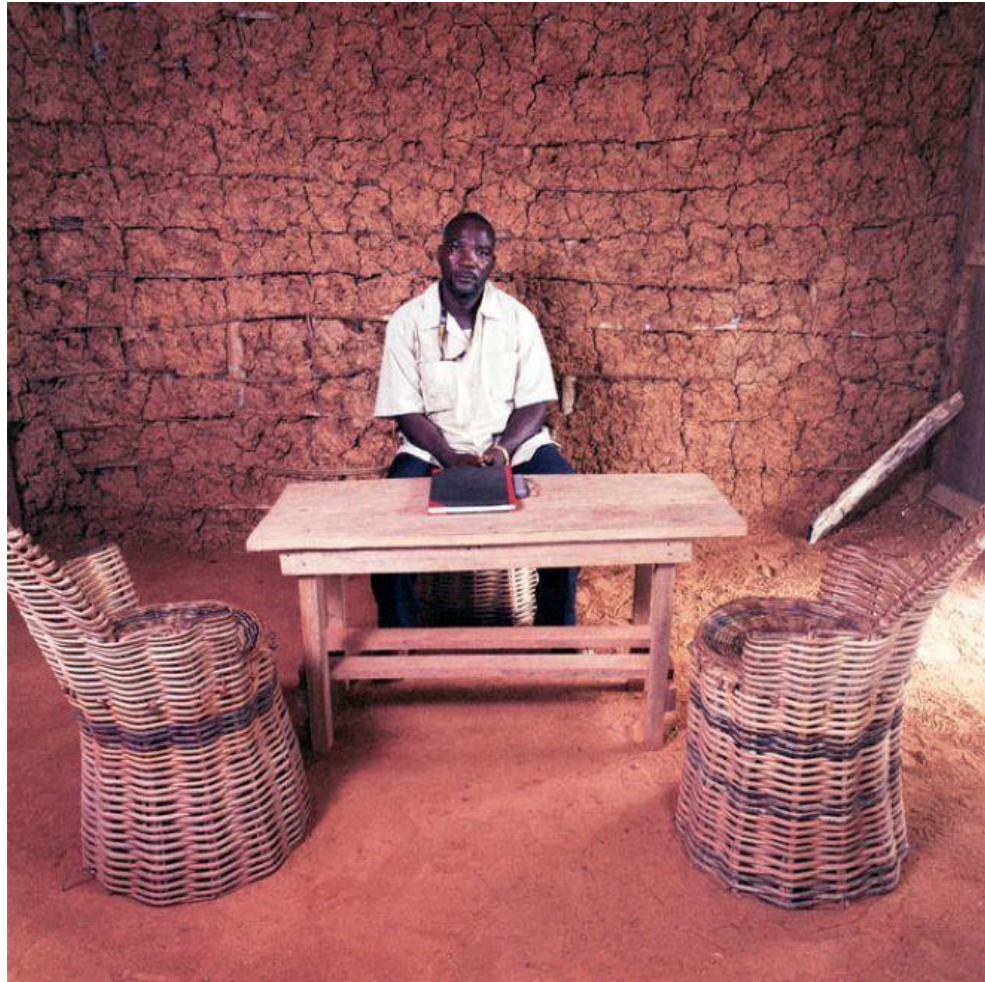


# BRINGING AFRICANS INTO THE TRADITIONS OF GOVERNANCE

Whatever the tensions of doing so within the imperial framework which so firmly subordinated the Gandan ruling class to British administrative officers, and the Gandan monarchy to the imperial crown



# BRINGING AFRICANS INTO THE TRADITIONS OF GOVERNANCE



European invented traditions were important for Africans in a series of overlapping phases. The military neo-tradition, with its clearly visible demarcations of hierarchy and its obvious centrality to the workings of early colonialism, was a first powerful influence.

Its impact reached a climax – particularly in eastern Africa.

The military mode became less influential than the modes of missionary employment or the bureaucratic build-up of Africans in state and business employment.



# BRINGING AFRICANS INTO THE TRADITIONS OF GOVERNANCE

They began by socializing Africans into acceptance of one or other readily available European neotraditional modes of conduct.

The process often ended with serious challenges to the colonial power, often couched in terms of the socializing neo-traditions themselves.

This was one of many reasons for the relatively high prestige among Africans in colonial Africa of non-productive employment.





# EUROPEANS AND «TRADITION» IN AFRICA

The invented traditions of nineteenth-century Europe had been introduced into Africa to allow Europeans and certain Africans to combine for «modernizing» ends.

They liked the idea of age-old prescriptive rights and they liked to compare the sort of title which an African chief possessed with they laid claim to themselves.

The assertion by whites that Africans society was profoundly conservative – living within age-old rules which did not change; living within a framework of clearly defined hierarchical status – was by no means always intended as an indictment of African backwardness or reluctance to modernize.



# EUROPEANS AND «TRADITION» IN AFRICA

Nineteenth-century Africa was not characterized lack of internal social and economic competition, by the unchallenged authority of the elders, by the acceptance of custom which gave every person – young and old, male and female – a place in society which was defined and protected.





# EUROPEANS AND «TRADITION» IN AFRICA

Around the same time Europeans began to be more interested in and sympathetic towards the «irrational» and ritualistic aspects of «tradition»



# AFRICAN MANIPULATION OF INVENTED CUSTOM

- ❖ All this could not have been achieved without a good deal of African participation.

John Iliffe writes: «The British wrongly believed that Tanganyikas belonged to tribes; Tanganyikas created tribes to function within the colonial framework...Europeans believed Africans belonged to tribes; Africans built tribes to belong».



# AFRICAN MANIPULATION OF INVENTED CUSTOM

Elders tended to appeal to «tradition» on order to defend their dominance of the rural means of production against challenge by the young.

Men tended to appeal to «tradition» in order to ensure that the increasing role which women played in production in the rural areas did not result in any diminution of male control over women as economic assets.

Indigenous populations appealed to «tradition» in order to ensure that the migrants who settled amongst them did not achieve political or economic rights.





# THE USE OF «TRADITION» BY ELDERS AGAINST YOUTH



The colonial reification of rural custom produced a situation very much at variance with the pre-colonial situation.

The pre-colonial movement of men and ideas was replaced by the colonial custom-bounded, microcosmic local society. It was important for the colonial authorities to limit regional interaction and thus to prevent a widening of focus on the part of Africans.



# THE USE OF «TRADITION» BY MEN AGAINST WOMEN

Thus «men's dominance in society, that is their control over religious beliefs and political organization» was expressed even more clearly in colonial invented custom than it had even been before.

Women had two possible means of asserting themselves against male dominated custom.

- ❖ They might turn to missionary Christianity and its notions of female rights and duties, or they might seek to use the counter-propositions available within African culture.
- ❖ Sometimes women sought to develop rites of female initiation which had on the past constituted a balance to male ritual influence in the microcosm.





# CONCLUSION

African politicians, cultural nationalists and, indeed, historians are left with two ambiguous legacies from the colonial invention of traditions.

One is the body of invented traditions imported from Europe which in some parts of Africa still exercises an influence on ruling class culture which it has largely lost in Europe itself.

The second ambiguous legacy is that of «traditional» African culture; the whole body of reified «tradition» invented by colonial administrators, missionaries, «progressive traditionalists», etc.

