



Examining Divergent Perspectives: “A Soldier’s Account” and “Obote’s Letter to a London Friend of the Battle of Mengo” 1966

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Abstract

This study delves into the contrasting narratives presented in “A Soldier’s Account” and “Obote’s Letter to a London Friend on the Battle of Mengo” regarding the historical event of the Battle of Mengo. The Battle of Mengo holds significant historical importance as a pivotal moment in the struggle for power and autonomy in Uganda. “A Soldier’s Account” provides a firsthand perspective, presumably from a soldier directly involved in the conflict, offering insights into the emotional and physical challenges faced during the battle. On the other hand, Obote’s letter, penned by a key political figure of the time, offers a more strategic and politically motivated perspective, likely aimed at shaping international opinion and garnering support. By juxtaposing these divergent accounts, this study aims to analyze the complexities of historical interpretation, the influence of personal bias, and the role of narrative in shaping collective memory. Through a critical examination of these sources, this research seeks to elucidate the multifaceted nature of historical events and the importance of considering multiple perspectives in understanding the complexities of the past.

Subject Areas

History

Keywords

“Battle of Mengo” 1966, “A Soldier’s Account”

1. Introduction

The tumultuous history of conflict, particularly within the African continent, is often narrated through a multitude of divergent perspectives, each offering

unique insights into the complexities of warfare, politics, and human experience. In this context, two primary sources stand out: “A Soldier’s Account” and “Obote’s Letter to a London Friend of the Battle of Mengo.” These documents encapsulate contrasting viewpoints on a significant event in Ugandan history—the Battle of Mengo. While “A Soldier’s Account” provides a firsthand narrative from the battlefield, offering insights into the visceral experiences of combatants, “Obote’s Letter” represents an official correspondence that reflects the political motivations and justifications surrounding the conflict. Together, these texts invite us to critically examine the divergent perspectives shaping historical narratives, challenging us to navigate through layers of subjectivity, bias, and interpretation to glean a deeper understanding of the events that unfolded. Through juxtaposing these accounts, we embark on a journey to unravel the complexities of war and its aftermath, exploring the intersections of personal testimony, political rhetoric, and historical truth.

Generally, this article employed a multi-method approach, incorporating historical analysis, archival research, and oral history interviews with surviving soldiers and witnesses of the Mengo Battle. By triangulating various sources, we aim to construct a comprehensive and nuanced narrative.

2. Contextualisation and Conceptualisation of the Misunderstanding of the Feudal and Federal Relationship between Buganda State and the Central Government in the Post-Colonial Era; A Colonial Legacy

Obote the then prime minister put it that Muteesa thought that he had presidential or constitutional powers, he was bigger than his office he thought he was king of Uganda and Buganda [1].

The British policy of indirect administration had emphasised the ethnic identity of each group at the expense of any loyalty to a central government (Mutibwa PM 2016) [2]. However for Buganda state its status did not change much on its incorporation into Uganda. Governor Cohen toiled with the idea even to the exiling the Buganda King. Nevertheless, the signing of the 1955 Namirembe agreement temporarily took off steam from this contestation. According to Mutibwa the Buganda state government was controlled by neo-traditionalists who were opposed to the protectorate Government’s constitutional programme for Uganda the construction of a unitary state. To cut the long story at independence Uganda emerged out as a federal entity. The 1962 Uganda constitution was a federal one; that concessions were extended to Buganda and not granted to other Kingdoms in the words of Mutibwa (2016; 183) [3] whereby Buganda was given full autonomy which meant that it was in a federal relationship with the central government. An arrangement Obote attempts to deconstruct hence the 1966 crisis. Obote being the political architect he was foresaw an opportunity a window of religious competition between two Baganda parties that were competing for state power. Thus, the formation of a coalition of his own party the Uganda people Congress the dominant neo-traditionalist royalist party (Kabaka

Yekka) in order to win state power. This state of affairs led to competition between the two dominant political forces in the country during the post-independent era.

3. Contrasting Explanations of Political Circumstances Leading to the Invasion of the Lubiri Mengo

a) Brewing divisions in KY (Kabaka Yekka Party) and UPC (Uganda People's Congress Party) alliance; with time cracks began to emerge with the KY /UPC alliance as UPC party members from Buganda started to take matters in their hands to take advantages of the weakness within the UPC party. These were seen in the parliamentary motion introduced on the 4th February 1966 by Daudi Ochieng calling for the suspension of Col. Idi Amin from military duties Obote's henchman who replaced Opolot as army commander and an investigation into the alleged receipt of gold and ivory from Congolese rebels by Amin, Obote, Onama and Nekyon all of whom were complicit in the scandal [4], the motion was introduced during Obote absence from Kampala. During the following days there were rumours of mysterious troop movements in and out of the capital as the two opposing factions struggled to ensure the presence of units loyal to on faction.

b) According to [5] the issue of the lost counties was also a contentious one; two important cash crop producing areas had taken by the British from Bunyoro in the early part of the century and given to the Kabaka in appreciation of his collaboration with the colonial state. This was left to independent government to iron out the issue. This matter was put to referendum. it was clear that outcome of this referendum would be favour of the residents the Bunyoro who for a while had decried the occupation of their land by foreigners the Baganda. On the hand the Buganda ruling class felt that they won rights to that land after it was handed to them by the colonial authority. This state of affairs broke up the KY-UPC coalition and thus the beginning of the bitter struggle for state power between Mutesa and Obote.

c) Suspension of the 1962 constitution and assuming all state power was the last straw that broke the horse's back for Buganda. This is when Buganda saw the coercive arm of the state police led by Erenayo Wilson Oryema, and the Army, led by Deputy Chief of Staff then Col. Idi Amin after Shaban Opolot's suspension. The support for Obote's takeover was voiced by the district councils or kingdoms legislatures in Lango, Kigezi, Bunyoro, Bugisu, and Teso. Karamoja, Acholi, west Nile and Madi but not Buganda kingdom. Obote accused both former President Edward Mutesa and Former Vice-President William Nadiope of approaching foreign governments for military assistance to remove him [2]. The new constitution in essence struck directly at the power of the traditional hierarchy in Buganda. Chiefs were henceforth barred from sitting in Kingdom legislatures and district councils. Second was the abolition of the Buganda civil Service Commission and ensured central state control of the Buganda government body. Third by eliminating official (but not Private) Mailo estates a thing that undermined the economic power of Buganda's governing classes. Fourth the

state undermined the coercive power of the Kabaka by eliminating the Buganda court system which had formerly enforced submissive deference to the kabaka's regime. Lastly, the federal division of legislative authority was virtually abolished by giving the National assembly sovereign legislative powers in all matters [6]. This respect Buganda had no option but to fight back hence the culmination was the encounter at Lubiri (Mengo Battle).

4. The Account of the Lubiri Attack

The official government account which was given in Obote's personal account titled *Myths and realities, a letter to a London friend*; this account, categorically denies that there was no storming of the *Lubiri* kabaka (King of Buganda)'s palace; it was rather a carefully selected unit of army men 40 in number which was meant to carry out an investigation on the nature of armed insurrection that had its source in the Kabaka's palace. A number of ex-servicemen had been roaming around the city (Kampala) since February 1966 causing mayhem. In the letter to a friend in London, there is an emphasis on a cabinet meeting that sat. In that meeting it is alleged that professional advice was sought from the police; which was that from the nature of armed attacks on police stations and other public facilities, it was to send an army unit and not the police.

“Obote added which I must frame as good behaviour, and the use of minimum force to gain entrance into the Lubiri (palace) for purposes of investigating stores of arms”.

‘I directed the army Commander specifically against an Army attack (storming of the Palace and that special care should be taken not to harm Sir Edward, whom I thought was in the palace’ [7].

The unit according to the orders and directives given to them, deposited themselves outside the palace for ten hours. It was those in the palace; who were equally armed in numbers than the army unit; according to Obote who went on shooting at the gates but the Army unit kept themselves out until about Four pm in the Afternoon of 24th May when the army gained entrance into the palace.

In another account serialised by the monitor News paper of Saturday June (09th 2012) collaborates Obote's letter to a friend in London in an article Titled ***Emergence of Obote and the attack on Lubiri.***

Obote we have a letter from a British firm which show that the firm was not happy with orders on the grounds that the weapons ordered were too heavy for an individual and that the firm had always delt with governments only [8].

President Mutesa had placed the orders on behalf of the Uganda Army and that although the Kabaka's government was to pay for the army. The monitor News Paper put it that after disagreement with Obote, Mutesa had plan for a coup. And on February the 22nd 1966 that was the day a coup was to have taken place: And that's why Obote ordered the arrest and detention of five Ministers Grace Ibingira, Dr Emmanuel Lumu, Balaki Kirya, Mathias Ngobi and George Magezi [2]: According to the views of the Monitor author of the article Mutesa did not have the political acumen of Ibingira other Uganda People's Congress

member Obote's own party but was opposed him. Mutesa took steps to arrange for a military take over being himself a British trained soldier, he enlisted the support of Brig Opolot and also, he hoped for a military intervention by a foreign country which was suspected to be Britain. When all these attempts could not materialise: this is when Mutesa as Kabaka of Buganda issued a ultimatum for central government to vacate the soil of Buganda before May 30th 1966 other accounts for example (Mutibwa 2016: 09) said the vacate order was issued on the 23rd May 1966. The county chief of Kyaggwe Mr Lamuka Sebanakitta and Jane Lutaaya of Ssinga and Omwami Matovu of Buddu were instrumental in the issuance of this notice to Obote government to vacate Buganda soil.

Obote as head of government business, interpreted these actions of Mutesa as the secession of Buganda and therefore declared a state of emergency on June the 1st 1966.

Echoed in his letter to a London friend; Obote ordered units of the Uganda Army to march on the Kabaka's palace at Mengo. The word was that Kabaka had amassed arms in the palace at Mengo in readiness for war. Therefore government/ Obote troops were sent to the Lubiri in search of Arms. It was at this point that the battle lines were drawn. The battle between the Uganda Army and the palace guards (Buganda Police) ensued. A seasoned historian Mutibwa tells us that the battle was stiff. Mutesa was assisted by his Lieutenants equipped with **Lee-Enfield** rifles put up a stiff resistance this led to a force commanded by Amin to call in a larger contingent of reinforcements, it was not to be expected that Mengo could hold out for long against the Uganda Army.

5. Haji Musa Kyeyune's Narrative of the Storming of the Lubiri Entrance Gate

On the other hand, according to Haji Musa Kyeyune's narrative; who had previously served with the Kabaka's police; begins his narrative that there were already rumours in the air of an imminent attack by government troops. There are two governments in the country waiting to confront each other. According to him the security men in the palace were put on standby orders/alert. They were further prepared by being allocated or distributed to guard posts. He Haji Kyeyune was posted on the gate traditionally known as *Kalaala*; together with one who was known as corporal *Kyatiifu*. They were also distributed with bullets.

Haji the narrator also pointed out that, one of the senior colleagues who was a police officer purportedly in charge of Buganda police mystically disappeared at the moment of need; he had formerly worked with the central government; and returned the next day late, in the afternoon the 22nd May. This was suspicious; for an officer who was in charge of the command, it was alleged that he was immediately then he was killed by the Buganda government officials/security for a show of betrayal and weakness. This was the first casualty of this war the storming of the palace.

According to Haji Kyeyune Musa now that they had resumed duty at their posts; they were under new command believed to have been that of Sir Edward

himself. On the 23rd day of May 1966, at around 4 am night, Haji Musa believes that when the actual fight /storming of the Lubiri began by the night of the 25th May 1966 at 4 am. That he kyatiifu had moved out the compound to check on suspicious movement it was; then he was shot by what was believed to be the attackers. Even the next person whom he does not mention by name was shot immediately it is believed that he had come to near the gate to investigate a shot he heard being fired; Haji Kyeyune at this moment in time sensed that they had been now surrounded. He the narrator had now taken cover behind a flower shrub and began to shoot. He says that this was the ambush that opened up the storming of the Lubiri/Palace.

Musa and one called Luzze had taken cover in the same place. He stated that in the army you were not supposed to change position unless they had new orders issued to them; so, they were stuck in the same position. And a one called *Masembe* who had attempted to climb over the wall was shot in the thigh mid-way in the jump over the wall.

By 6.30 am, he Hajji Musa said they had surrendered as a force as he put it; there was a heavy downpour of only 20 minutes by the time it subsided the commander of the war (Sir Edward) on the side of Buganda had escaped from the Lubiri/palace. It was believed according to hajji; That this rain was unexpected there were no signs of rain; it was mysterious that it only rained in the vicinity of the areas of the Lubiri, very heavily allegedly to allow the King to escape from the government troops. According to Haji Kyeyune the traditionalist alleged that the gods had sent this heavy down power to save the king. This is also echoed in Mutesa's book *The Desecration of My Kingdom*

It rained with violence that made it impossible for the war to go on. For an hour visibility was reduced to a Minimum and the main noise was the water thudding on the roof and hissing in the trees. It was God's way of saving his people from the edge of death (The Kabaka of Buganda; desecration of my kingdom).

It was when the rain subsided that Mutesa jumped over the wall of his palace; however, in so doing he hurt his backside. This is in the direction of a place today known as *Kabwakaganda*, in the vicinity of *Kabaka's Lake*. A man-made lake believed to have been dug in pre-colonial times by Mutesa 1 the King's grandfather: whose name he had been named, but is still a large water body today. While the government soldiers were arresting the survivors of this raid namely the king's wife, (*Nabakerega*) Damali.

The government troops had now arrived in large numbers probably from reinforcements; even though according to Hajji Kyeyune they had also died in large numbers in the course of the fighting. It was now daylight and a truck was now sent to dispose of the dead. According to Hajji Kyeyune it was a tipper truck meant to carry building materials but does not mention which make it was. All the dead were put on the truck including them that were alive. He hajji Kyeyune said that the truck went in the direction of Lake Victoria to dump the bodies in the lake. Instead of Luzira the government maximum prison. He said

all his guard colleagues dead and alive were dumped on the truck for transportation; namely Masembe, *Kinobe* and *Kyazike* who were believed to have been dead already. Along the road to the Lake, (Lake Victoria) they met several roadblocks. On each of the occasions the soldiers inquired: '*Ndiyo Hawa waliowauwa wanajeshi wa serikali*' '*Are these the ones who killed government soldiers?*' However notably the last roadblock had four (4) men according to Hajji Kyeyune he identified them by tribe; a *Muganda*, A *Munyoro*, and a *Musoga*: then the commander who was an Acholi, according to Hajji Kyeyune the narrator in Kiswahili were ordered: ('*kama walio ambao wako hai shuka kwenye gari*') '*if there any alive let them disembark*': he Kyeyune said he jumped from the trunk while being canned by the soldiers. But unfortunately, his colleague Masembe who had been shot in the thigh could not: bearing in mind he was fat wounded and heavy. Thus, he was dumped in the lake along with the dead bodies.

Hajji Kyeyune says that no sooner had they reached the gates of Luzira maximum prison their lot was called back. This time round they were ordered to be brought to the Kampala central police station. At C PS (central Police station) we entered Room 43 where he said we found two gentlemen. Wawuuyo and Kanywamusaayi interrogated them inquiring how many government soldiers have you killed. Hajji Kyeyune said at this moment in time they were fed up; so, they answered questions from the interrogators how; Kyeyune put that they were asked the interrogators, how many government soldiers they killed; on their part, they answered that they had killed enemies of the Buganda state; Because they were trained to do that. They were sent to the next interrogation room 44 still at the central police station Kampala. In this room, there was an Asian policeman of Sikh origin. He also inquired in Swahili "*Ndiyo hawa walio wauwa wanajeshi wa serikali*" '*Are these the ones who have killed government forces?*' but this was a torture room where as he says a big stone with straps was tied to his manhood and he was told to stand of course this was impossible for him. He was now with colleague Kinobe. Again, they were returned to Luzira but they had just spent 10 minutes they again recalled this time round he said they were taken to the parliamentary building. This was yet another torture chamber. He says there was a small room in the shape of a domestic refrigerator. just for one person to enter facing backwards airtight in this one he narrates that ice-cold water slowly oozed from the feet to the chest by the of the process he could not stand upright he had collapsed it is at this point he was separated from Kinobe he does not whether it was at this stage he believed that Kinobe died or was killed. Hajji Kyeyune says he woke up after two days in Mulago the National Referral Hospital. It was then that he was taken back to Luzira Maximum Prison. He says that he managed to get strength after receiving medication.

Hajji Kyeyune said they were released after one and half years, and even they were going to release prisoners' music was played loudly from prison loudspeakers. On the day they were released were put on the prison bus; with instruction that each one should be put where he/she originated but he says they were

dropped at a place in Kampala that was named the queen's tower this tower was a gift given to Uganda government on independence of a clock tower. It is here that he met again with Kinobe whom he had presumed dead. He adds that as prisoners they were to be paid for work done during incarceration but they were just sent home empty-handed and for clothes still wore old khaki uniforms with blood stains. He said on his release he went to Kibuli a Kampala suburb to stay with his brother Ssepewo his elder brother. He was given residence of a free house and a new mattress.

6. Aftermath of the Attack of the Lubiri

After the declaration of a state of emergency by the then government in power today referred to as Obote 1 regime. To begin with, in essence, the government had won the war over Buganda separatists. The result was the former Buganda chiefs were still in hiding. According to Hajji Kyeyune Buganda villages were still ghost towns with abandoned houses while other prominent political figures exiled themselves, even though such cases returned after a while. Kyeyune without evidence paints a picture of rape theft, which has resulted in illegitimate children. And Baganda civil servants were transferred to non-Buganda districts.

The Lubiri Palace was almost destroyed in the course of the fighting and the looting which followed. Historic artifacts and royal regalia were stolen and destroyed, including the *Mujaguzo* drums. This desecration caused immense psychological suffering for many Baganda who regarded the event as an apocalypse. Kabaka Mutesa II died in exile but was allowed to be buried in Buganda by a new president, Idi Amin. Amin promoted the narrative of a Muslim boy from the poor outskirts of the country taking on the Christian leader of Uganda's dominant tribe. The mystique of this action granted him greater legitimacy at least in some sub-populations.

Also, within a few days, the Kabaka and two of his bodyguards were able to cross the border to Burundi and exile. After brief stays in Nairobi and Addis Ababa, he was given asylum in the United Kingdom where he stayed until his death, under mysterious circumstances, in 1969. Various Baganda chiefs, members of the royal family and others thought loyal to the Kabaka, were imprisoned.

The major political reforms were the introduction of a republican constitution that abolished the monarchical institution in Uganda in all its forms. Obote dissolved the UPC (Uganda Peoples' Congress) and KY (Kabaka Yekka) alliance, which was certainly the end of the Buganda government in Uganda. Thus, by 09th June 1967 amendments to the 1962 were complete such as the abolition of Kingdoms whereby Buganda was divided into 4 Districts and for this matter new districts were created in Buganda West Mengo, East Mengo, Masaka and Kampala: the term Buganda was effectively removed from the political language as well as from the geographical map of Uganda.

It was presumed from some corners that the above acts by the prime minister now president in the new dispensation it is believed were aimed at hurting the

pride of the Baganda: To rub salt into the wound, Obote turned the former Buganda Parliament building (Bulenge) into the headquarters of the Ministry of Defence and this building was renamed Republic House. In addition, the Kabaka's Palace at Mengo was turned into Malire army barracks.

By the above new constitution, the Buganda Land (the 9000 square miles or *Ettaka Ery' Akenda*) as it is called in the local language; that land had been returned to Buganda at independence and placed under the Buganda Land Board, was now under this new arrangement this land was placed under the Uganda Land Commission.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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