The Origins of the Wanga Kingdom

The origins of the Wanga Kingdom, as its entire history, belong to the migration and settlement of the ancestors of Abashitsetse. The standard version of the migrations and final settlement of Abashitsetse at Imanga begins near Kaimosi in Tiriki. Abashitsetse travelled and lived together with the Abalubakha clan of the Abatirichi. They may have wandered together with the other Luhya people from Egypt or West Africa into Buganda and Busoga; the Lake Victoria area in Kenya and as far as Naivasha and Kapsabet, before settling near Kaimosi by the middle of the 16th century. Muwanga later died and the generations of his sons Wamoyi and Muwanga II lived near Kaimosi for twenty years.

Muwanga II succeeded his father as the Nabongo. When he died, his younger son Wanga succeeded him, but the eldest son, Khabiakala, and half-brothers Wamoyi II and Mutende opposed it. This made Wanga migrate to Imanga in South Wanga Location between Mumias and Musanda The area was inhabited by Abamuima and Abamulembwa. Mumia Liyai ru led the two clans. The story goes that Wanga lived and worked for Muima, and that he disguised himself in order to hide his royalty because it was taboo for a royal member to work for another as a commoner.

However, Wanga’s royal status was discovered and while the crime was being cleansed in traditional ceremonies, five members of Abashikawa, Abakalibo, Ababuka, Abakhami and Abacherro arrived at Muima’s court from Tiriki to collect their Nabongo Wanga. The request was granted. Back at Kaimosi, the family feud broke out afresh, It forced Wanga, his family and supporters (e.g. the five clans above) to migrate to Imanga where they settled permanently. The two brothers, Khabiakala and Wamoyi II remained at Kaimosi while Mutende migrated to South Nyanza. Other half-brothers went to Nandi.

Wanga and his people settled at Imanga in the middle of the 16th century. Nabongo Muima allowed them to settle in uninhabited areas such as Eshikulu near River Lusamia, Ebuchirinya, Tingale, Ebutende, Indangalasia and Elusibo in South Wanga and Ekonjero in Buholo. The places were many, suggesting that Wanga and his people were many. This view is further illustrated by the fact that Wanga searched for and settled in other areas. He settled at Kimatuni in South Bukusu and Siaya. He later retreated and settled first at Elureko (Mumias) and then at Matungu in North Wanga. At Matungu, Wanga died. He had many sons who became the founders of the sub-clans of the Abashitsetse.

There were two important consequences of the migration and settlement of Abashitsetse in Wanga. The first consequence was that the Wanga area was settled. The second consequence was the rise of Abashitsetse Dynasty to the position of power and authority. This historical development was gradual and almost unnoticeable. It has been suggested by some writers that Wanga conquered the Muima state. This interpretation is not convincing, in view of the reception and settlement of Wanga and his people in the area. In any case Wanga and his people were few and were without military power to undertake conquest. It is most likely that through intrigue and collaboration with Abamuima, Wanga gained popularity and was elected
to succeed Muima. The process of conquest, if it happened at all, might have been inflicted on the Abamuima sub-clans which opposed Wanga’s succession.

It will be recalled that both Muima and Wanga were kings. Two kings cannot rule one kingdom, but the kingdom developed from a clandom or a confederation of clandom. The clan was the basis of political, social and economic organisation in pre-colonial Africa. The clans co-existed because of blood relationship (i.e kinship) or what was called blood-brotherhood through intermarriage, trade, diplomatic relationship and the need for security and peace. The clans were equal and sovereign.

In Wanga, as it was all over Buluhya, the clan was organised by Liguru assisted by a Council of Elders. (Abakofu bakali or Abakali be Lizokho). The Liguru was a consultative and advisory leader. He had omukasa (copper bracelet) and a dress made from the skin of a colobus monkey. The regalia is still kept today. In view of the claims that Wanga was a king before settling with his people in what became Wanga Location, it can be argued that what is known as the Wanga Kingdom was a confederation of co-equal clans ruled by Muima and Wanga. It is the centralisation of power, as well as its systematisation, that the Wanga Kingdom began. Most kingdoms began through intrigue, collaboration and conquest. The rise of the Wanga Kingdom followed the same pattern.

The extent of the Wanga Kingdom

There are two versions regarding the extent of the Wanga Kingdom. The first version is that the Wanga Kingdom extended as far west as Buganda; as far south as Samia; as far north as Mount Elgon and as far east as Naivasha. This version was advanced by Abawanga, and the British imperialists supported it in order to get allies in the imposition of colonial rule. The second version is that the Wanga Kingdom coincided in size with North Kavirondo, later called North Nyanza, i.e the present Western Province.

Thus, the Wanga Kingdom was synonymous with Buluhya. Since some Luo e.g., Abaholo and Jo-Ugenya were at one time claimed to be ruled by the Wanga or were in North Kavirondo, they were supposed to be in the Wanga Kingdom. This version was popularised by Abawanga during the years 1902--1933 when they played a dominant role as the colonial chiefs. The British supported the claim in order to justify the idea of indirect rule i.e, the use of local rulers. But what was being practised was direct rule; the imposition of Wanga agents as chiefs.

The probable extent of the Wanga Kingdom was restricted to the areas inhabited by the Abawanga. It ended on the borders of the present Busia District in the west; the Babukusu in the north; the Banyala in the east; the Batsotso in the southwest; and Marama and Buholo in the south.

The first version of the extent of the Wanga Kingdom reflects the areas which the Abawanga might have passed through or lived in only for a while. It makes it clear that the Wanga Kingdom was one of the interlacustrine kingdoms, a fact that raises the controversy of its origins. The interlacustrine kingdoms in eastern Uganda, e.g. Buganda and Ankole, were probably founded by the Babito Dynasty of the Luo. B.A.
Ogot concluded from this view that the Abashitsetse Dynasty might be related to the Babito. This view is not convincing. The origins and growth of the Wanga Kingdom can be understood in the context of migrations and settlements.

The first people to settle in Western Kenya were, the Nandi, Kony, Bok and Bongomek, and Uasin Gishu Maasai (Kwavi) The Luhya clans were the second settlers. Most of them had evacuated the area around Lake Victoria as the southern Luo or Kenya Luo settled The Luhya in turn occupied the areas which the Nandi and Uasin Gishu Maasai had occupied. The Kony, Bok and Bongomek, settled in the area around Mount Elgon. They are also known as the Elgon Maasai. Some of the Kwavi lived in Wanga and they acted as mercenaries of the Nabongo. They were joined by the refugees from Maasailand during the 1840s due to civil wars and natural calamities such as drought, rinderpest, smallpox and malaria.

The clans of the Abaluhya share a lot in their stories of migrations, and this shows the assimilation and adaptation which took place. For example, Abalogoli are related to Abanyole; Abawanga to Abatirichi; Abakisa to Abedakho, Abamarama to Abatsotsos and Abatsotso to Abakabras The Luo also settled in areas once occupied by the Abaluhya. For example, Abachero in Wanga came from Alego. There was considerable assimilation between Nandi, Maasai and Luhya people. Many clans in Kabras, for example are of Nandi origin.

The migrations and settlements in Buluhyia were intensive from 1870 to 1915. Clans such as Abebere from Marachi, -Abamutiru from Bugisu, Abashiemi from Busoga and their cousins Abalaku (of Nandi origin) and Abanatsiri settled in Wanga in the 1800s. Abasamia, Abakhayo, Abamarachi, Abanyala, lived in Butsotso from the 1850s to about 1915 when they settled in their present homelands. It was reported in 1911 by colonial authorities that Abesukha and Abedakho were settling in Kabras and Butsotso. The migration and settlement in Western Kenya continued during the colonial period.

**The Idea of the Wanga Empire**

There were mainly two consequences of migration and settlement. The first consequence was territorial expansion. Territorial expansion occurred in two ways. Firstly, the new corners needed urgent settlement and they used force. The pioneers found it unnecessary to defend the areas they had known or lived in. The pioneers were fewer than the immigrants and so they would be overpowered if they attempted to defend their land. Furthermore, there was plenty of land to occupy. Secondly, pioneers voluntarily accepted new immigrants. Trade and intermarriage followed. As the population expanded, conflict arose, leading to clan warfare. The territorial expansion of the Luhya and Luo in the general region took these two forms. On the southern borderland, conflict continued up to 1895.

The second consequence was that centralisation of power and authority did not develop. It was only the Wanga who succeeded in forming a state. The formation of the Wanga Kingdom led to territorial and political expansion in the last years of the 18th century, during the reign of Nabongo Wamukoya Netia. Nabongo Netia used the Uasin Gishu Maasai to raid neighbours for cattle and his successors did the same. The Maasai became a factor in the history of Abashitsetse, and they controlled the events
at court. We know this from the activities of Nabongo Netia. Netia can be called a trickster who enjoyed killing people. He was called a dictator.

He strangled the Maasai. He invited them to beer drinking parties. A killer sat outside the house where the party was going on and he held the tail of a long rope which had a loop in the house. The loop was hung round the neck of a drunk Maasai and when Netia signalled, the killer pulled the rope. The Maasai later discovered the trick and at one beer party, they did not get drunk. They pretended, however, that they were drunk. Nabongo Netia and his killer set to work and they were discovered. The Maasai revolted and overthrew Netia, who was later killed. Henceforth, they continued to determine and even control political development in the kingdom up to the 1840s.

The trickery of Nabongo Netia was perhaps designed to eliminate the Maasai at his court. It may also have been designed to strengthen his personal power. The Abashitsetse Dynasty was prone to feuds, which led to the disintegration of the kingdom between 1814 and 1841. The sons of Nabongo Osundwa Netia rivalled each other over the throne. The elder son, Kweyu was tricked by the younger one called Wamukoya, who then succeeded Osundwa.

In protest, Kweyu seceded and founded Wanga Mukulu (Upper Wanga). Wamukoya ruled Wanga Elureko (Lower Wanga). The two states co-existed but Wanga Elureko was prominent. Nabongo Shiuundu Wamukoya (1841—1882) established effective and respectable authority and it was during his reign that the Wanga Kingdom reached its greatest extent and was known beyond Buluhyia.

The kingdom was visited by Arab and Swahili slave traders. They operated from Elureko (future Mumias) against the Babukusu in the north from 1878. The most notorious slave-raiders were Sudi of Pangani and Abdulla bin Hamid of Mombasa. It seems that Nabongo Shiuundu told the slavers to go into Bukusuland which means that the Babukusu were the main Luhya enemies in the north. Instead of solving the threat, the Babukusu deepened the hatred and developed military defence under Makite wa Nameme. Sudi indigenised himself and became a centre of political power. Namajanja rivalled him.

The sub-ethnic societies in Buluhyia had their own leaders. Nganyi, a rain-maker was the recognised leader in Bunyore. Dindi and Ndombi Were leaders of Bakhayo and Banyala of Nabakholo, respectively. Odero Malo was recognised in Gem. Thus, there were many centres of power and authority. The claim by the Wanga, the British imperialists and John Osogo that the Nabongo exercised power over a wider region is unconvincing. There was a mutual alliance between Wanga Elureko, BUholo, Kisa and Marama, to safeguard border security. The southern neighbours, the Jo-Ugenya or Kager Luo and Jo-Gem had the habit of demanding or fighting for land. Wanga Mukulu similarly had co-existence with Butsotso and Kabras in the east. The idea of a Wanga Empire is therefore a myth.

Osogo used three examples to support the view that the Wanga Empire was a reality. The first example was that people paid tribute to the Nabongo through his agents, appointed locally. The tribute was in the form of iron
implements and food. The second example was that the Nabongo, had a large army composed of Wanga, other Luhya and the Kwavi. He estimated the army at 10,000. The army raided for cattle and it “constantly reminded subjects of the over lordship of the Nabongo”. The third and final example which Osogo used to support the idea of an empire was that the Nabongo married from Busoga, Bugisu, Teso, Maasailand, Gem, Ugenya and all over Buluhyia. These examples, however, do not show that the Wanga Empire existed.

The Wanga kings had no tributary satellites. Osogo was confusing pre-colonial Wanga and colonial Wanga. It was only during the colonial period that Wanga agents were notorious tax-collectors. Secondly, the existence of a large army does not mean that the Nabongo exercised authority far and wide. The army was not used for territorial expansion. Furthermore, marrying from many different places did not mean the exercise of authority in those places. Intermarriage was a diplomatic approach in cementing cordial relations and co-existence. Intermarriage was also practised by ordinary men.

Thus, the Wanga Empire is a myth. Osogo himself used the expression Wanga Kingdom and Wanga Empire interchangeably. Of the Wanga Empire, there would have been emperors; it would thus mean that kings were subject to them. The Wanga Kingdom itself was shaky and divided. Before the British came, Wanga influence among the allies had declined. Nabongo Mumia was assisted by the British to stabilise the political situation in Wanga. The Wanga colonial agents did not exercise power for Mumia. It was the power of the British that they exercised.

Source: Makers of Kenyan History; Nabongo Mumia, Heinemann Kenya, ISBN 9966-46-808-0