

## Transgressing Buyira: An historical inquiry into violence astride a Congo-Uganda border

### Abstract

In the forenoon of 27 November 2016 Uganda's Rwenzori region climaxed in mass bloodshed. The Buhikira Royal Palace of the *Obusinga Bwa Rwenzururu* (OBR) came under a fierce attack by the Uganda joint security forces. Both property and human lives were brutally desecrated. Across the international border, in the Congo's Rwenzori region, things had been no less violent, particularly since 2014.

This doctoral study comes to grips with the following question: What historical conditions account for the pathologizing relations between the (post-independence) state and the Yira society on both sides of the Congo-Uganda border? In answering this research question, the narrative starts *not* with the colonial state and economy, but rather with what preceded them.

The study marshals an array of evidence—archival, oral, and ethnographic—across different spatial and temporal registers. A novel historical explanatory framework for political violence in the wider Rwenzori region is laid out. It is built from the standpoint not of the conquering state, but of the people living in Buyira (a precolonial confederacy of seven autonomous Yira polities in and across Upper Semliki Valley). In the first instance, the thesis shows how precolonial Yira people's relationship to territorial space was re-ordered in the sole interest of the colonial state (Belgian and British). In the second, the thesis documents the resilience of the precolonial Yira spatial imagination—the cosmogenic vision of *ekihugho*. This resilience would outlive the colonial regime and its border regimes of surveillance (visa) and taxation (duty). To yesterday's constituent members of Buyira turned *borderlanders*, these border regimes represented an infrastructure of violence that had either to be resisted, or eluded.

The study argues that, since the emergence of their precolonial confederacy of Buyira, the Yira people had seen their polity borders *not* as dividing barriers but rather as connecting bridges. But the cartographic vision of space, since the heyday of European colonial conquest, invoked insistence on border-as-barrier. Pitted against this colonial-modernist cartographic vision is a precolonial Yira cosmogenic vision of space. Reimagined as *BaNande* (on the Congo side) and *BaKonzo* (on the Uganda side) by the European colonial state (Belgian and British respectively), the Buyira contravened *all* colonial-modernist border regimes. For them, doing so constituted a salutary attempt at cleansing their transgressed space of a noticeable political malady.