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Iron Mothers and Warrior Lovers: Intimacy, Power, and the State in the Nyiginya Kingdom, 1796-1913

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by

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ABSTRACT

Iron Mothers and Warrior Lovers: Intimacy, Power, and the State in the Nyiginya Kingdom, 1796-1913

by

Sarah Elizabeth Watkins

This dissertation explores the development of the role of the Queen Mother in the Nyiginya kingdom between 1796 and 1913. Using case studies of four Queen Mothers immediately preceding the onset of Belgian colonial rule, I examine how they manipulated changing social and political circumstances to increase their own power bases, transforming the nature of the monarchy itself. Through oral historical narratives, royal rituals, colonial accounts, and local and family histories I reveal a social order in flux, and a monarchical system increasingly dependent upon intimate kinship relationships. Within this context, I argue that the power of the King, relative to the Queen Mother and other intimates, waned when faced with the innovations of joint rulership. These innovations developed in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and culminated with the reign of Nyirayuhi V Kanjogera (r. 1895-1931), who has become the iconic image of the Tutsi monarchy for both supporters and detractors over the course of the post-colonial period. My research refocuses the historiography of the late Rwandan monarchy, which has previously centered on kings, warriors, and male ritual practitioners, to its women rulers as a way to illustrate the importance of clanship to the development of kinship. Further, I raise larger questions about

the nature of monarchy and its sometimes perilous reliance upon a network of intimate relationships, and argue that this system is constructed in part out of what feminist scholars have labeled “intimate labors.” My research advances the current discourse within Rwandan studies about the nature of social identity in the period immediately prior to and during the early decades of colonial rule. I evaluate the historical construction of social identity by illustrating the importance of regional and family identities, and how gender identity and rank complicate these ideas even further. I challenge the conventional periodization of African history, which has centered the experience of colonialism as the defining event for African societies. Instead, I propose an approach to colonial history that treats European conquest as one of many important social and political upheavals that involved negotiation, adaptation, and resistance on the part of African polities. Finally, I place precolonial African history within a global context, drawing comparisons with cultures in East Asia, Latin America, and Europe, in order to emphasize African history’s vital contribution to world history.

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Nyiramongi, wife of Gahindiro (Ega)
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Rwogera, son and heir of Gahindiro and Nyiramongi (Nyiginya)
Nkusi, son of Gahindiro

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Umugabekazi Nyiramavugo II Nyiramongi

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Nkoronko, brother of Rwogera and son of Nyiramongi (Nyiginya)
Rwakagara, brother of Nyiramongi (Ega)
Nyamwesa, son of Rwogera (Nyiginya)
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Rugereka, brother of Nyarwaya of Byavu (Ega)
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Rutarindwa, son of Nyirabugunga and adoptive heir of Rwabugiri (Nyiginya)
Baryinyonza, son of Nyiraharaye, adopted by Rwabugiri (Nyiginya)
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Ruhinankiko, son of Rwakagara (Ega)
Bisangwa, advisor to Rwabugiri
Mugugu, advisor to Rwabugiri
Nzigaye, advisor to Rwabugiri

Musinga's Court (1896-1913)[1]

Mwami Yuhi V Musinga
Umugabekazi Nyirayuhi V Kanjogera

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Muhigirwa, advisor to Rwabugiri and half-brother of Rutarindwa

Rebels

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Muhigirwa, eventually joins with Muhumusa
Mpumbika, claimant to the throne of Gisaka, supported by Zaza Fathers
Ndungutse, warrior who claimed to be Muhumusa's son
Basebya, a Twa separatist

Kanjogera's faction

Kabare, brother of Kanjogera (Ega)
Ruhinankiko, brother of Kanjogera (Ega)

Musinga's faction

Baryinyonza, adopted son of Rwabugiri (Nyiginya)
Burabyo, adopted son of Rwabugiri (Nyiginya)

[1] Musinga was *mwami* until his abdication in 1931. However, this dissertation analyzes only the first part of his reign, ending in 1913. The main players at the court changed after this period, and thus are not included in this list.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Note: In Kinyarwanda, the change from singular to plural is done by changing a prefix, usually from "um-" to "ab-." I call attention to this in the text as often as possible. The "ab-" prefix can also be shortened to simply "b-," in some cases, though this is not uniform throughout the scholarship and appears to be left up to the discretion of the writer.

Ibibanda (plural)		Matridynastic clans
Mwami (singular)	*Bami* (plural)	King
Ubwoko (singular)	*Abooko* (plural)	Clan
Umwamikazi (singular)	*Abamikazi* (plural)	Queen
Umugabekazi (singular)	*Abagabekazi* (plural)	Queen-Mother
Umuganura		First Fruits Festival/Ritual
Umuyango (singular)	*Imilyango* (plural)	Great lineage
Umwiru (singular)	*Abiru* (plural)	Ritual specialist

Introduction

A debate over history is at the heart of Rwanda's political struggles today. This debate can be summed up in a simple question: Whose stories can be told? Indeed, much of Rwanda's recent history has been defined by this question. At its heart, it is a question of belonging, of identity, and of the perilous connections between past, present, and future.

To this end, historical research in Rwanda is often subject to contemporary politics. During the independence era and First Republic under President Gregoire Kayibanda (1962-1973), like many African countries, Rwanda needed a nationalist historiography, defying European colonialist narratives of an Africa with no history. This nationalist historiography largely took the form of the monarchical history of the Nyiginya dynasty. The Nyiginya clan (*ubwoko*) is one of eighteen that form today's Rwanda. From the late seventeenth century onward, it dominated the political system of central Rwanda, and had a major impact on surrounding areas.[1] Historians during Juvénal Habyarimana's Second Republic (1973-1994) challenged the monarchical narrative, instead portraying the Nyiginya dynasty as aggressors, and the autonomous Hutu kingdoms that opposed them, mostly in the northwestern part of the country, as heroes. This history supported the further marginalization of Rwandan Tutsi, and ultimately helped to fuel genocidal fear during the 1990-93 Civil War, leading to the 1994 genocide.

[1] The chronology of political centralization is complex and contentious. See Alexis Kagame, *La notion de génération appliquée à la généalogie dynastique et à l'histoire du Rwanda des X-XI siècles à nos jours, Par L'abbé Alexis Kagame* (Bruxelles: Académie royale des sciences coloniales,1959); David Newbury, "Trick Cyclists? Reconceptualizing Rwandan Dynastic Chronology," *History in Africa*, 21 (1994), 191-217; J.K. Rennie, "The Banyoro Invasions and Interlacustrine Chronology," PhD Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1973; Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), particularly Appendices I and II.

In the aftermath of the genocide, the RPF-led (Rwandan Patriotic Front) government has sought to create a history of unification, which minimizes conflict, virtually erases ethnic differences, and centers on the genocide and its effects.

But Rwanda's history is more than the 1994 genocide. Its monarchical history is more than just kings and conquest. And Rwanda's society, culture, and politics are much more complex than a divide between Hutu and Tutsi. This study aims to highlight a tumultuous period in Rwanda's more distant past, in the hopes that by creating a new lens with which to examine its history, we may also be better-equipped to deal with current challenges.

By the nineteenth century, the monarchical system in present-day central Rwanda—a region called Nduga—had developed into one headed by a ritualist king, or *mwami*, who ruled with his equally-powerful mother until her death.[2] Both held power simultaneously as ritual practitioners and political actors, but to differing degrees. The position of *umugabekazi* (queen mother), was initially imagined as a mechanism for keeping rival families from challenging the dominant Nyiginya dynasty. Yet the *umugabekazi* grew into a position of formidable political power, particularly over the course of the nineteenth century as a function of changing social and political dynamics, as well as the machinations of the individual women who held the post. An exploration of these women as portrayed through oral historical narratives, royal rituals, and local and family histories reveals a society in flux, and a monarchical system increasingly

[2] In the Nyiginya kingdom, the *umugabekazi* was the biological mother of the king, in contrast to other kingdoms such as Asante. Kanjogera, who was *umugabekazi* after the death of Rwabugiri in 1895, is a perfect example of why this policy was instituted. She was named *umugabekazi*, but Rwabugiri's son by another wife, Rutarindwa, was named mwami. Kanjogera plotted with his enemies to overthrow Rutarindwa and enthrone her son Musinga. She succeeded at the coup of Rucunshu in 1896, which is heralded as one of the bloodiest massacres in Rwandan history. Vansina, *Antecedent*s, 186.

dependent upon intimate personal relationships: mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, husbands, wives, and lovers. Within this context, it is apparent that the power of the *mwami*, relative to the *umugabekazi* and other intimates, waned when faced with the innovations of joint rulership that developed in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, culminating with the reign of Umugabekazi Nyirayuhi V Kanjogera (r. 1895-1931), who has become the iconic image of the Tutsi monarchy for both supporters and detractors over the course of the post-colonial period. The case studies presented here refocus the historiography of the late Rwandan monarchy on its women rulers, which has in the past centered on the kings, warriors, and male ritual practitioners, and instead portrays a royal court in which power was more ambiguously gendered than the previous literature has implied. Further, this portrayal raises larger questions about the nature of monarchy itself, and its sometimes perilous reliance upon a network of intimate relationships. Finally, it advances the current discourse within Rwandan studies about the nature of social identity in the period immediately prior to and during the early decades of colonial rule, complicating notions of nationalized identity with those of family, region, gender, religion, and class.

The historiography of Rwanda reflects this politicization of history. The first major academic historian of Rwanda was Alexis Kagame. Kagame was born into the Singa clan to a lineage that had long served as the official historians for the Nyiginya court. As such Kagame's prolific historical work told the story of an ancient dynasty, ruling over an ancient country, with long-held traditions and beliefs. For Kagame and his supporters, many of whom belonged to the royal family and Tutsi nobility, this history of kings and warriors was *Rwanda's* history. Their modern nation, newly-emerged from colonialism and in a climate of anti-Tutsi violence and bigotry by the time Kagame

published his *Abrégés* in 1972, traced its roots back centuries to the shores of Lake Muhazi, and its mythical founder, Gihanga.[3]

Kagame's scholarship was used to great effect by supporters of the monarchy—mostly Tutsi—who found themselves marginalized and often forced into exile after independence and the transition to majority rule. Helen Codere's excellent collection of Rwandan autobiographies from the period immediately preceding independence reveals how powerful memories of a strong and independent monarchy were to those Tutsi who held elite status under it.[4] But for detractors of the monarchy, especially Hutu who grew up in the west and northwest of the country—which were more-or-less autonomous territories until the beginning of the twentieth century and the onslaught of German colonialism—history was *not* defined by the Nyiginya monarchy. Ferdinand Nahimana, the most prominent of Kagame's critics, created a body of work that decentralized Rwanda's precolonial history, and called into question the success of the Nyiginya dynasty in conquering and assimilating much of the territory included in Kagame's definition of "Rwanda." Nahimana's work was also politicized; it was seized upon by radical elements within Habyarimana's regime as a way to justify growing anti-Tutsi sentiment. Habyarimana's wife, Agathe Kanziga, organized a clique of northern Hutu that formed the basis of her husband's political power. This *akazu*—meaning "little house," but more generally referring to a political network that often works

[3] Alexis Kagame, *Un abrégé de l'ethno-histoire du Rwanda*, T.1 (Butare, Rwanda: Editions universitaires du Rwanda, 1972).
[4] Helen F. Codere, *The Biography of an African Society: Rwanda 1900-1960: Based on Forty-Eight Rwandan Autobiographies* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'afriquecentrale, 1973), see especially the autobiography of Mukandori, pgs. 147-60.

surreptitiously—included Nahimana, and has since been identified as the main ideological force behind the 1994 genocide.[5]

The historiographical conversation about the history of the territory and polities that would become Rwanda is not limited to scholars of Rwandan descent. Jan Vansina, whose methodological analyses of the historical uses of oral tradition helped codify the usage of such sources for Africa's historians, did much of his early research in Rwanda. While Vansina focused largely on political history, his development and incorporation of regional and local sources, in addition to those involved with the royal court, created a history of the monarchy from a more popular perspective. Further, Vansina's scholarship—especially his 2004 monograph *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*—is one of the few to incorporate elite women into his narrative.

David Newbury and Alison Des Forges took this historiographical debate into new directions beginning in the 1970s. Des Forges' 1971 dissertation, "Defeat is the Only Bad News: Rwanda Under Musinga, 1896-1931" examined how the Nyiginya monarchy both adapted to and resisted first German and the Belgian colonial encroachment.[6] Her extensive collection of oral histories with political elites from around the country form the basis of her argument, which was that state power and centralization of what we know today as "Rwanda" was due to a complicated collaboration between missionaries,

[5] Nahimana himself is currently serving a 30-year sentence for his role in planning and fomenting the genocide. He was convicted of genocide, conspiracy to commit genocide, incitement to commit genocide, complicity in genocide, and crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, Tanzania, in 2003. His conviction stemmed not from his historical scholarship, but from his involvement and editorial control of Radio TélévisionLibre des Milles Collines (RTLM). *The Prosecutor v. Ferdinand Nahimana, Jean-Bosco Barayagwiza, Hassan Ngeze (Judgement and Sentence)*, ICTR-99-52-T, International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), 3 December 2003, http://www.refworld.org/docid/404468bc2.html, last accessed 29 April 2014.

[6] Alison Liebhafsky Des Forges, "Defeat is the Only Bad News: Rwanda Under Musinga, 1896-1931," PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1971.

European officials, and a monarchy that did not realize it was slipping into obscurity until it was too late. Before turning her energies full-time into the human rights work that would make her both famous and infamous in Rwanda, Des Forges began a project examining the dynamics of what she called "joint-rulership" in the Nyiginya dynasty of the nineteenth century. The only available work resulting from this research was a paper presented at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association in 1976. Yet it demonstrates that important scholarly consideration of the roles of the female monarchs of the Nyiginya kingdom began during a period marked by increased interest in women's historical roles in African history in general.

David Newbury's contribution to the study of the Nyiginya monarchy was to place it within a regional context, particularly in the mid-eighteenth through mid-twentieth centuries.[7] This is a perspective that has gone too often unremarked upon and somewhat disregarded by scholars concerned with Rwanda's later history, much to their discredit. It is this painstaking regional work, conducted largely in a political, social, cultural, and conceptual borderland, that raises the most compelling questions for anyone interested in the more distant past of not only the Great Lakes Region as a whole, but for what became contemporary Rwanda in particular.

The project of a nationalist historiography holds an important place in Africa's history and historiography. The emergence of independent nation-states in Africa in the 1960s after decades of European colonial rule—and still more decades of the rapacious and exploitative international slave trade—imbued new African elites with the desire to assert their own version of their histories, in contrast to the often condescending and

[7] David Newbury, *Kings and Clans: Ijwi Island and the Lake Kivu Rift, 1780-1840* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

ahistorical colonial-era historiography. Hegel's assertion of Africa as a continent without history cast a long shadow. Some of these new nations sought to throw off colonial identities and embrace the more distant past. Ghana, for instance, named itself after a Saharan empire that dissolved in the thirteenth century. Yet by this naming, it claimed a political, intellectual, and economic history beyond its more recent colonial experience, as well as beyond its geographic and temporal borders.[8]

Terence Ranger alludes to a similar process in Zimbabwe, which styled itself the heir to ancient Great Zimbabwe, and appropriated its symbols as a new kind of spiritual, ancestral nationalism.[9] Ranger himself was part of this nationalist historiography, describing the need in newly-independent countries—and especially those that underwent protracted and violent conflicts to obtain that independence—to have a past that transcended colonial rule. In their important article on the process of creating a nationalist historiography in Tanzania, Donald DeNoon and Peter Kuper identify the major themes of the emergent Tanzanian history, but caution that such an approach is necessarily exclusive, and can have important ramifications for how history is remembered: "It is one thing to re-assert the continuity of African societies and the role of African initiatives; it is quite another to play down the significance of the colonial context within which they were worked out."[10] This point is crucial to a critical consideration of the nature and usefulness of nationalist historiography.

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[8] See A. Adu Boahen, and Toyin Falola, *Africa in the Twentieth Century: The Adu Boahen Reader* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), especially Chapter 24; and, J. B. Danquah, and A. Adu Boahen, *The Ghanaian Establishment: Its Constitution, Its Detentions, Its Traditions, Its Justice and Statecraft, and Its Heritage of Ghanaism* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1997).

[9] Terence Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, 2 (2004), 215-234.

[10] Donald Kuper and Adam Denoon, "Nationalist Historians in Search of a Nation: The "New Historiography" In Dar Es Salaam," *African Affairs: The Journal of the Royal African Society* 69 (1970),

Christopher Hill argues in his book, *National History and the World of Nations: Capital, State, and the Rhetoric of History in Japan, France, and the United States* (2008), that the project of national history emerged from moments of political upheaval in modernizing countries as a way for society to grapple with the implications of those upheavals.[11] In Japan, for instance, the arrival of Commodore Perry and subsequent fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate in the 1850s and 1860s produced the modernizing Meiji Restoration beginning in 1868. But the nationalist history of the Meiji Period was predated by an earlier movement, the *kokugaku* historians, who as early as the eighteenth century created a school of thought emphasizing ancient and essential Japanese-ness as a response to scholarly institutions that emphasized the importance of Chinese culture and Buddhism in the development of Japanese culture and history.[12] But even this proto-nationalism (if such a term is appropriate) was a response to a perceived outside threat.

In his seminal work on the phenomenon of nationalism, Benedict Anderson argues that nationalism, by its very nature, must be exclusive and exclusionary.[13] The nation as a conceptual space is defined, at least in part, in opposition to something else. In the cases Hill cites, that "other" takes varying forms: in France it was a response to the Bonapartist state and failure of the Paris Commune; in the United States it was the Civil War. In Japan, it was the spectre of a divided and conquered China. The Meiji

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329-349. For further explication of this, see Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David S. Newbury, eds., *African Historiographies: What History for Which Africa?* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1986); also, Terence O. Ranger, "Towards a Usable African Past," in *African Studies since 1945: A Tribute to Basil Davidson*, ed. Christopher Fyfe, (London: Longman, 1976), 17-30.

[11] Christopher L. Hill, *National History and the World of Nations: Capital, State, and the Rhetoric of History in Japan, France, and the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[12] See for instance, Susan L. Burns, *Before the Nation: Kokugaku and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); also, Michael Wachutka, *Kokugaku in Meiji-Period Japan: The Modern Transformation of 'National Learning' and the Formation of Scholarly Societies* (Boston: Global Oriental, 2013).

[13] Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

government perceived that unless it modernized, it would see the same fate. And, as Hill argues, part of the modernization project was the development of a national history: a history that incorporated all political developments in the territory now claimed by the modern state, and that treated the emergent nation-state as the inevitable product of political and social evolution.

This is characteristic of many of Africa's national histories as well. Partha Chatterjee has argued that nationalism in what he called the "colonial world" was a derivative discourse of "Western" nationalism. But Hill's presentation refutes this, and complicates the world of Chatterjee's analysis. If national history is a product of modernization, for Chatterjee to be correct, the project of modernization itself must also be a specifically "Western" one. Yet when national histories developed in the formerly colonized world, they developed if not in opposition to a "Western"-defined modernity, then to a version that challenged "Western" modernity's cultural chauvinism, defying colonial-era characterization of their cultures as un-civilized and ahistorical. Nationalist historiography developed as a form of resistance to colonization. It was an explicit rejection of the fundamental European justifications for colonialism in the first place. By portraying the nation's history as an unbroken story of progress, from an ancient civilization through the modern nation-state, it was a powerful repudiation of the "civilizing mission." For if the formerly colonized world had possessed civilization for hundreds or even thousands of years, what possible need could it have for European ideas and the violence that accompanied them?

This is a clear trend in Rwandan historiography, and proponents of this nationalist approach include some of the most important scholars. The two most prominent are

Alexis Kagame and his intellectual successor, Bernardin Muzungu. Both are descended from the Singa clan, which produced an important lineage of historians and poets at the Nyiginya court during the monarchical period. This legacy seems to have affected the perspective from which both Kagame and Muzungu wrote their histories. Both scholars oriented their research around developments of the royal court, and its expansion into peripheral areas. As such, these bodies of scholarship form what can accurately be described as a history of the Nyiginya monarchy. But is this the same as a history of Rwanda?

This brings us back to David Newbury. In a commentary on Jan Vansina's monograph, *Le Rwanda ancien*, Newbury argues that a royal history is not the history of a kingdom.[14] To illustrate this argument, he returns, as does Vansina, to the original academic historians of Rwanda: Alexis Kagame, Peter Schumacher, Léon Delmas, and G. Pagès. Of these four scholars, the first three drew their information from court sources—that is, these histories are based on information gathered among professional historians at the Nyiginya court in the early twentieth century. Pagès' sources were from outside this court circle. This information is central to Newbury's argument, because the sources involved in these early histories were part of an intellectual community. They were not simply storytellers, but historians involved in the analytical labor that we associate with the modern discipline. But because of their presence at the royal court, they also served a specific political and ritual function. It was the official history that legitimized the dynastic lineage, which they claimed could be traced back over 800 years. This is the version of history for which Alexis Kagame is so well known.

[14] David Newbury, "Writing Royal History: Is Dynastic History Equivalent to the History of a Kingdom?" *African Studies Review* 45, 1 (2002), 140-149.

Vansina departed from this history by, like Pagès before him, by seeking out non-court sources. The stories he collected, known as *ibiteékerezo*, or "historical tales," were told by commoners, not by official court historians.[15] He gathered these stories from around the country between 1957 and 1961, and they provide a rich and varying account of the history of the Nyiginya kingdom.[16] While Newbury acknowledges the importance of this type of what he calls a "subaltern" critique of dynastic history, he remains critical of the project of royal history as representative of the kingdom as a whole. Rather, he advocates for a regional approach that can offer competing narratives. This is what Newbury did in his own book, *Kings and Clans* (1991). By centering his analysis on a political and cultural borderland, and extending that analysis to a time period prior to state centralization, he illustrates the eventual development of kingship on Ijwi as a much later stage in a historical process, rather than the beginning of that process. And it is with this that he makes his most important contribution to Rwandan historiography.

It is often tempting to engage in writing histories that treat the contemporary nation-state as the inevitable product of a relentless march of "progress." Thus, histories of the Nyiginya dynasty and its expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries become a history of "Rwanda." Yet this type of historical generalization bolsters efforts to quash dissent and to promote political repression, issues that are all-too-common in present-day Rwanda. When the pasts that scholars and citizens are allowed to imagine are limited by the state, political visions for the future are likewise limited.

[15] Jan Vansina, "Historical Tales (Ibiteekerezo) and the History of Rwanda," *History in Africa*, 27 (2000), 375-414.
[16] The Jan Vansina Collection Ibitéekerezo: Historical Narratives from Rwanda: A Collection of Texts and Translations, 1957-1961 (Chicago: CRL-CAMP Dept. of Photoduplication, University of Chicago Library, 1973).

This dissertation, then, attempts to subvert the nationalist historiography paradigm by focusing on a specific aspect of the monarchy and by treating the royal court as one part of a larger society. But unlike Newbury's work, which challenges the monarchy-as-nation narrative from the outside, I aim to undermine it from within, by questioning the fundamental premise of Rwanda's monarchical past: the hegemony of the Nyiginya.

Kings, Clans, and the Women Responsible for Them

Perhaps the most misunderstood facet of Rwanda's past—including the past before Rwanda—is the nature of social relations. Despite the scores of pages devoted to the topic since the 1994 genocide, few studies have devoted much space to the precolonial era. The apparent reason for this is the ongoing assumption that colonialism—and in particular Belgian colonialism—was the genesis of the conflict between Hutu and Tutsi. What remains left out of this discussion is everything else. The conflict between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda is indisputably important, but it is not the be-all-and-end-all of social relations in the country. While most commentators seem to have finally learned that Hutu and Tutsi are designations bound to particular historical circumstances, it seems impossible to consider that forms of social identity and differentiation that existed prior to colonialism and the centralization of the Rwandan state could continue to wield power in the twentieth century.

But it is worth exploring why so many scholars of the precolonial period in this region, and particularly those whose research spans decades and various iterations of the postcolonial state, return to the theme of clan and lineage when describing the social and

political development. This is a central issue in David Newbury's *Kings and Clans* (1991). His main argument is that the development and historical evolution of clans on Ijwi Island helped construct and support kingship and that these two forms of hegemony supported one another, rather than being at odds.[17] He notes, "Immigrants to Ijwi seek the clan status of one of the Ijwi clans; likewise, those moving off Ijwi to the mainland find it useful to claim membership in a mainland clan (though often the same clans are found in both places). Aside from that, clanship is primarily important for its ritual role on Ijwi, a role most clearly expressed at Muganuro. Clearly it is in relations with the court that clanship achieves its most important 'political' functions on Ijwi."[18] Clans functioned in a similar way for the Nyiginya kingdom. Even in royal mythology, the origins of clans—and especially the *ibibanda*, the clans from which *abagabekazi* (queen mothers) descended—are a key theme. In at least one account, these clans were not all descended from the same divine genesis that produced the *Ibimanuka*, the Divine Kings descended from Mantu (man/humankind) and his father, Shyerezo Nkuba, the King of Heaven.[19]

What is significant about Newbury's statement for the purposes of this study is that clan membership is the key aspect of social identity. The main form of belonging not only in the central Nyiginya kingdom, but in the territory east of Lake Kivu in general was clanship. What's more, these clans were not primordial, biologically-derived family groups, but rather politicized expressions of kinship and status and the result of a

[17] David Newbury, *Kings and Clans: Ijwi Island and the Lake Kivu Rift, 1780-1840*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 15.
[18] Ibid., 39.
[19] For excellent English translations of these myths, see Rose-Marie Mukarutabana, Gakondo: The Royal Myths, http://www.dlblanc.com/Gakondo/en/Myths/index.php; last accessed 26 April 2014.

historical process.[20] Over time, and often through interaction with the central court, particular clans came to be identified with particular attributes and labor. For example, the Tsobe clan, concentrated around Bumbogo in the north-central part of contemporary Rwanda, produced important ritual practitioners who played the key role in both monarchical inauguration and the *Umuganura*, or First Fruits festival (to which Newbury refers). The Singa, the clan from which Alexis Kagame and Bernardin Muzungu descended, were renowned as important court historians. But these identities were not ahistorical or fixed; rather, they emerged during a process of expansion, co-optation, and appropriation on the part of the central court. This process also helped to shape the Nyiginya as the royal clan.

This study is not immediately concerned with the origins of clanship in the Nyiginya kingdom, nor how the kingdom became dominated by the Nyiginya dynasty. Rather by analyzing developments in clanship in a later period, we can shed light on potential patterns of development in the more distant past, for which we have fewer sources. The primary objective of this study is to broaden our understanding of political and social developments in the Nyiginya Kingdom, and how these developments helped to create the colonial state of Rwanda that emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century. As such, an analysis of clanship and its historical evolution is central to this study. But the major challenge in conducting such an exploration is that, in most cases, previous scholarship, as well as primary sources, deal with clanship only indirectly, if not tangentially. So then how do we approach a topic obscured in historical scholarship, de-

[20] Newbury makes this argument more forcefully with a focus on what is today western Rwanda. David Newbury, "The Clans of Rwanda: An Historical Hypothesis," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 50, 4 (1980), 389-403.

historicized by colonial-era data and research, and largely ignored in present-day political discourse?

The tactic here must also be indirect. If we cannot begin by centering clanship itself, then we must instead take as our point of departure the circumstantial and correlative evidence of clanship's importance. If we begin from Newbury's thesis that clanship and kingship were mutually constitutive forms of hegemony, then we must look to their intersections in order to understand how that relationship functioned. I remarked above that clanship was a politicized expression of kinship. Anthropological scholarship has contributed to our understanding of kinship. Robin Fox's definition offers a good starting point for how to approach kinship, which he contends is "the study of what man does with these basic facts of life - mating, gestation, parenthood, socialization, siblingship etc."[21] Lewis Henry Morgan was the first anthropologist to identify kinship as the central and universal unit of social organization across cultural boundaries, while acknowledging the structure of that kinship differed from one society to another.[22] Anthropologists who followed him contoured and critiqued his ideas, and yet kinship remains a dominant theme across anthropological fields.[23]

David Schneider's work in cultural anthropology built upon Morgan's, further interrogating the notion of kinship and its construction and meaning in U.S. society.[24]

[21] Robin Fox, *Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
[22] Lewis Henry Morgan, *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).
[23] For example, Meyer Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order; the Legacy of Lewis Henry Morgan* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1970); and, Thomas R. Trautmann, *Lewis Henry Morgan and the Invention of Kinship, New Edition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).
[24] David Murray Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968); also, David Murray Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984).

The crux of Schneider's argument is that kinship in some societies is not limited to what Morgan called "consanguinity," but rather constructed from meanings and symbols that were culturally-consistent with the idea of "family," a concept known as "fictive kin." It is for this reason that Schneider's encouragement of research in LGBTQ life and culture was so crucial: he was one of the earliest scholars to recognize the conscious creation of kinship networks within a context in which biological ties held little meaning, but in which both social and political identities were intertwined.

Queer theorists have applied these ideas in different ways, but a few are particularly relevant for our purposes. Kath Weston, in her analysis of the creation of kinship ties within lesbian and gay communities in San Francisco in the 1980s, explains how anthropologists and those who used their work often set up a hierarchy of kinship types, privileging biological/blood ties over those constructed of symbolic and affective meanings, such as love, affection, and physical intimacy.[25] Weston's exploration, and that of the majority of queer theory, deals primarily or even exclusively with U.S. or "Western" models of family and kinship (which has led to fascinating and important critiques).[26] But the theoretical basis established by such work has uses and implications far beyond the United States, or even queer politics.

[25] Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
[26] See, for example, Daniel Winunwe Rivers, *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013). For critiques, see for example Qwo-Li Driskill, ed., *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011), and especially Andrea Smith's essay "Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism," within that collection. For a rare African example of female same-sex intimacies, see Serena Owusua Dankwa, "'It's a Silent Trade': Female Same-Sex Intimacies in Post-Colonial Ghana," *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 17, no. 3 (2009): 192-195.

The concept of clanship marries the aforementioned idea of family or kinship to political usage. As David Newbury's research has made clear, the establishment and development of clanship in the regions surrounding Lake Kivu had some elements of biological kinship, but were also based on historical processes that led to a more complex form of social organization. Kinship was, in some ways, biologically-determined. In the Nyiginya kingdom, one's clan was ostensibly determined by the clan of one's father. But fatherhood itself was not as simple as biology. As we shall see in the case of the Nyiginya monarchy, adoption was a common practice, and thus could alter a child's clan membership.[27] Further, regardless of who may have fathered a child, the child belonged to the husband of the mother. But immigrants could—and often did—claim membership in an existing clan because it gave them both immediate status, as well as a sense of belonging within the society. The notion of belonging is not simply politically or socially advantageous, but affective as well.

Sara Ahmed argues that emotions are cultural practices, not psychological states.[28] These cultural practices are conditioned through the repetition of rhetoric and symbols, which are themselves historically constituted. In Ahmed's view, emotions can play a powerful role in the creation of political alliances and movements, and create new forms of identity. This analytical frame is particularly valuable when engaged in concert with kinship, and especially with the understanding of kinship as something political. Biological ties create a particular set of cultural expectations, both for the individuals involved in the biological relationship, as well as how that relationship is perceived and

[27] Kagame discusses this in a more general way in an early treatise on family life. Alexis Kagame, *Les organisations socio-familiales de l'ancien Rwanda* (Brussels : Academie royale des sciences coloniales, 1954), 248-50.
[28] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

institutionalized by the larger society. But these relationships are also based on intimacy, a private relationship between two individuals that, as Lauren Berlant discusses in the Introduction to her edited volume *Intimacy*, also shares "an aspiration for a narrative about something shared."[29]

Berlant's conception of the intimate complements Ahmed's theorization of emotions as culturally-constructed practices. Where Ahmed highlights the importance of performing affective emotions as a way to create recognizeable relationships, Berlant emphasizes how "intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation. Its potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress 'a life' seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability."[30] Berlant, then, is concerned with the impact of intimacy on institutions.

Though feminist and queer scholars have theorized the roles intimacy can play in building, challenging, and altering institutions, the vast majority of this scholarship has been based in and centered on the United States and Western Europe, and mostly analyzes the post-World War II era. But these theories propose important questions that apply to a wide variety of historical situations. Intimacy, for example, is a useful tool for gaining a better understanding of clanship. And interrogating emotion as a cultural construct in service of developing a political identity provides a beneficial entry-point for the study of kinship as part of the evolution of a monarchical system.

[29] Lauren Gail Berlant, ed., *Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1
[30] Berlant, ed., *Intimacy*, 2.

Most monarchical regimes grew out of a system of competing clans, when a single clan developed into a dynasty supported by other elites and bolstered by other institutions.[31] Like national histories, the histories of these dynasties have often been written in a way as to make the dominance of that dynasty inevitable; yet we know that this dynastic system has been, in virtually every historical period and location, an unstable and unpredictable form of political development. The source of this instability is that the foundation of monarchical systems is kinship, a form of social belonging based on intimacy and affective emotion.

This was undoubtedly true in the Nyiginya kingdom. Clans, or *abooko*, were composed of lineages, *imilyango*. These lineages were more historically "shallow" than the clans themselves, which as we can see from the origin stories became as mythologized as the kingdom. *Imilyango* were usually only traced back a few generations to an important ancestor. The names of *imilyango* reflected this. For example, the *umuyango* (lineage) descended from Rwakagara—the brother of Umugabekazi Nyiramongi (r. 1845-1867)—was known as the "Abakagara" or "the people of Rwakagara." If the *umuyango* continued, the name would usually change when another distinctive man became its *chef de famille*, or head of the family. While histories of the Nyiginya kingdom have focused on these patrilineal *imilyango*, they have neglected a fact that is so obvious that it is easily overlooked: these lineages, while carrying the

[31] For an excellent introduction to several case studies, see René Lemarchand, *African Kingships in Perspective: Political Change and Modernization in Monarchical Settings* (London: Cass, 1977). For specifically East African examples including Rwanda, see Steven Feierman, The *Shambaa Kingdo: A History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974); Ferdinand Nahimana, *Le Rwanda, emergence d'un êtat* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993); and Christopher Wrigley, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For comparative examples in the Pacific, see Robert J. Hommon, *The Ancient Hawaiian State: Origins of a Political Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and, Patrick Vinton Kirch, *How Chiefs Became Kings Divine Kingship and the Rise of Archaic States in Ancient Hawai'i* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

names of their illustrious male ancestors, were in fact perpetuated by women. Without women marrying into these families and producing more sons, the lineage would cease to exist. But discussions of women in the more distant past are complicated by an utter dearth of sources: except, of course, those women belonging to the most famous *imilyango* that were closely-related to kingship.

It is for this reason that in order to understand how clanship and kingship were intertwined in the Nyiginya kingdom, we must concern ourselves with what are generally treated as "women's history": marriage, reproduction, motherhood, and sibling relationships. Clans outside of the Nyiginya became part of its dynastic history through intermarriage.[32] The political and historical reasons for this are discussed in chapter one. But in order to properly examine this, we cannot treat marriage as simply an economic or political transaction. There were other forces playing upon the institution, and which profoundly impacted the nature of these marriages, as well as the children they produced. Intimate relationships—marriage, parenthood, lovers, friendship, sibling relationships—were an integral part of the development of the Nyiginya dynasty. In examining the interplay between political figures who were also intimates, we begin to see the importance of Lauren Berlant's description of intimacy as a complex, unstable, and unpredictable foundation on which to build institutions. This becomes particularly salient when those relationships are themselves the foundation of a political system.

The intersection of sex, love, politics, and institutions forms an important part of feminist scholarship and women's history. A common theme in this literature is the use

[32] Kagame argues, somewhat dubiously, that intra-clan marriage was frowned upon in "ancient Rwanda;" while this may have been in the case in the upper echelons of the Tutsi nobility, there is little evidence one way or the other in the rest of society. Given that the myriad *imilyango* that made up a clan were not necessarily consanguine—a differentiation Kagame does not make but that Newbury does—this creates some questions about Kagame's interpretation. See Kagame, *Socio-familiales*, 95-121.

of intimate spaces—usually within marriage or other socially-acceptable gender roles—to allow women to exercise influence and agency within otherwise patriarchal environments.[33] Analyzed broadly, these studies demonstrate that though women's actions and possibilities were limited, women were still able to exercise some forms of power. Institutions such as marriage, however, have often been cast as mechanisms of control.[34] In fact a major theme within both feminist scholarship and activist discourse has been the framing of institutions, media, education, and rhetoric as apparatuses to control women's bodies, sexuality, reproductive capacities, and political personhood. And world history is full of examples demonstrating how this has worked, from the reactionary domestic regulations of Caesar Augustus, to Puritans in England and the United States, and to the suppression, abuse, and shaming of women combatants in Zimbabwe's Second Chimurenga, despite official rhetoric labeling them as "comrades."[35]

Yet other scholars have theorized how women have been able to use sexuality and nurturing to their favor. Catherine Hakim calls this "erotic capital," and argues that it is a form of capital separate from the economic, social, or cultural varieties.[36] Hakim places erotic capital within the intellectual context of emotional labor—that is, "a form of emotion regulation that creates a publicly visible facial and bodily display within the

[33] See Lyle Koehler, *A Search for Power: The "Weaker Sex" in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); also, Jocelynne A. Scott, *The Sexual Gerrymander: Women and the Economics of Power* (North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press, 1994); and, Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
[34] See Anthony Barrett, *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); also, Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and, Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (New York: W. Morrow, 1991).
[35] Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi, *For Better or Worse?: Women and ZANLA in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle* (Oxford: African Book Collective, 2000).
[36] Catherine Hakim, *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

workplace."[37] Within a capitalist system, this kind of labor includes home health care workers, airline hostesses, administrative assistants, and sex workers. When married to an affective analysis, this emotional labor becomes "intimate labor." In their introduction to the volume of that name, Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas write, "The category 'intimate labor' places in a continuum the discretely examined categories of care, sex, and domestic work."[38] The unifying feature to all of these is attentiveness. Those who perform these intimate labors are tending to physical, sexual, and affective needs. Intimate labor, then, could comprise all manner of private and domestic work.

These theories have been developed in a specific historical context: that of the modern, capitalist, and globally-connected world. As such, they are most often in dialogue with theories of the modern welfare state that emerged in the United States and Europe following World War II. But this theoretical framework, like Berlant's concept of intimacy or Ahmed's analysis of affect, can be helpful in indicating new ways to conceive of older forms of socioeconomic interaction, including monarchy and clanship. After all, each features similar situations: marriage, motherhood, and sex. How these institutions, relationships, and behaviors were understood differs, of course. But they are not wholly alien to one another. After all, the modern world developed from what came before it.

In particular, I am concerned for the purposes of this study with the types of intimate labor that contributed to the growth of clans and therefore kingship. These intimate labors were as much the purview of women as of men, and perhaps more.

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[37] Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
[38] Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Social Sciences, 2010), 3.

Hannah Arendt differentiated between "labor" and "work," using the terms in a manner reversed from their usage amongst most scholars, including those labor scholars cited above.[39] Though Arendt's argument in *The Human Condition* (1958) is premised on her understanding of the Greek terms she defines as "labor" and "work," her insights as to the political differences between these concepts are useful. One, she argues, is governed by domesticity, reproduction, and the metabolic processes of human existence. She puts into this category tasks such as subsistence farming, cooking, hygiene, and birth. The other is the purview of the public sphere, labor that creates what she calls "the human artifice." It is this type of labor (which she calls "work") that produces something lasting, imbued with meaning, and which serves to help create human identity. In the context to which she is referring, which is the construction of the modern "West," Arendt's creation of this dichotomy resonates. Certainly feminist scholars of labor have persuasively made their case that work associated with women and domesticity has been, and is, undervalued in capitalist society. But this conception of such ideas only functions within a capitalist frame. Further, it generally neglects to consider these women's own notions of how their labor functions within both spheres. It is helpful, then, to reconceptualize these valuable theories in a new way.

Within a monarchical setting the work of reproduction and the work of state-building were intimately connected. The "feminine" labor involved in building erotic capital—that is, cultivating beauty, sexual attractiveness, social presentation, and sexual competence—was an integral part of building clanship and thus of developing kingship. Inasmuch as the elite men of the Nyiginya kingdom accumulated wealth through cattle raids, pastoralism, and conquest, so too did the women by mothering, governing, and

[39] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

contributing to the evolving ritual basis of the monarchy. The human artifice that was created in Nduga—present-day south-central Rwanda—and which crept into neighboring territories did so as much through marriage as through conquest. The most important figures within this, and which illustrate most clearly the intersections between private and public labors, were the *abagabekazi*, or queen mothers. At their most effective, these women wielded power by casting themselves into acceptable affective tropes—the grieving widow, the doting mother, the loving wife, and the virgin regent. When they stepped outside these bounds, the practical limits to their authority become clear, and often resulted in violent and deadly consequences.

Queens, Queen Mothers, Wives, and Lovers: Elite Women in Precolonial African Historiography

Recent scholarship on queen mothers in precolonial Africa has illuminated our understanding of the complex and critical roles elite women played in the formation of powerful African states. The growing literature on queen mothers in precolonial Asante suggests that their power was based in cultural understandings of women as the bestowers of citizenship. Since membership in the political community of Asante was conferred by birth, and through the mother's line, Asante citizenship was intimately tied to motherhood.[40] This does not mean that the *Asantehemaa* (queen mother) was a

[40] Agnes Akosuo Aidoo, "Asante Queen Mothers in Government and Politics in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 9, no. 1 (1977): 1-19; also, Emmanuel Akyeampong, and Pashington Obeng,"Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 28, no. 3 (1995), 481; and, Beverly J. Stoeltje, "Asante Queen Mothers : Precolonial Authority in a Postcolonial Society," *Institute of African Studies Research Review*, 19 (2003), 1-19.

women's representative within the Asante political structure.[41] Rather, Asante *ahemaa* (queen mothers) and other senior women seem to have gained in power and stature during times of turmoil in the kingdom, when men in power either failed to act or were ineffective. Akyaawa Yikwan, a member of the royal lineage, negotiated a peace treaty with the British after a series of conflicts and British encroachments into internal Asante affairs in 1831. [42] Yaa Asantewaa, who served as queen mother of Ejesu at the turn of the twentieth century, waged a war against the British after the *Asantehene* (Asante king) was sent into exile with his advisors.[43]

Buganda provides a fascinating comparative case study to Rwanda, with the two kingdoms existing in such close proximity. Both employed a complex set of patron-client relationships in order to build up a centralized bureaucracy, and in both, patrilinearity and patrilocality emerged as the dominant systems of power. Nakanyike B. Musisi argues that as polygyny became a marker of elite status, women became an important commodity between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries.[44] This, along with increased trade with the Swahili Coast and later contact with the British, effectively eliminated the political power that women had held as queen mothers and sometimes even as rulers prior to the nineteenth century.[45] The Buganda situation forms a stark contrast to Rwanda where, I

[41] In contrast to the Iyalode in Yoruba societies, who was an elected representative for the women of the community. Bolanle Awe, "The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System," in *Readings in Gender in Africa, ed. Andrea Cornwall* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 196-200. Also, James Lorand Matory, Sex *and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
[42] Ivor Wilks, *Forests of Gold: Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993), 329-361.
[43] A. Adu Boahen and Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong, *Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante-British War of 1900-1* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003).
[44] Nakayike B. Musisi, "Women, 'Elite Polygyny,' and Buganda State Formation," *Signs*, 16, no. 4 (1991), 757-786.
[45] Holly Hanson, "Queen Mothers and Good Government in Buganda: The Loss of Women's Political Power in Nineteenth-Century East Africa," in Women *in African Colonial Histories*, eds. Jean Marie Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 219-236.

argue, the undermining of ritual authority created a space in which elite women could obtain and exercise increasing power throughout the nineteenth century. It is possible that the difference in women's fortunes in the two kingdoms is related to outside influences, such as trade with the Indian Ocean world. Whereas Buganda was an active trading partner with Swahili and Arab merchants from at least the fifteenth century, the Rwandan central court did not become involved with long-distance trading until the late nineteenth century, though coastal and regional trade existed on the borders of the kingdom prior to this.[46]

Edna G. Bay's study of royal Dahomean women is the most prominent example of the literature on precolonial queen mothers and other elite women. Bay argues that as women's roles in religion and ritual practice changed from the eighteenth to twentieth century, so too did their access to political power, and their influence upon the state.[47] Bay's work is significant for historians of gender and the precolonial state for two reasons. First, she explicitly draws attention to the importance of religion and ritual in constructing and maintaining legitimacy for the monarchy. While religious rituals were fundamental for many states in precolonial Africa, including Rwanda, the relationship between religion and state has been often neglected in the historical literature. Second, Bay illustrates how changing notions of power and shifting economic realities concentrated power into a few male hands, decreasing the opportunities for elite women and those in the lower classes participate in the political process. This latter point is at the heart of my study.

[46] David S. Newbury, "Lake Kivu Regional Trade in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal Des Africanistes* 50 (1980), 6-30.
[47] Edna G Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics, and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

The *abiru* (ritual specialists) of Rwanda were a council who were responsible for maintaining and performing the dynastic genealogy and official oral traditions of the kingdom, collectively known as *ubwiru* (royal rituals). The relationship between the terms here is significant, because the *abiru* were understood to be the embodiment of the rituals. They were also responsible for protecting the drums related to kingship, including the Kalinga, which was the drum that signified the legitimacy of the *mwami*. The physical possession of the Kalinga, along with the annual cycle of rituals performed as prescribed by the *abiru*, formed the basis of Nyiginya legitimacy. The *abiru* became part of the royal court in Rwanda in the late seventeenth century, probably as a way to quell a rebellion in a recently-conquered part of the kingdom.[48] This was a common pattern of centralization in the interlacustrine region during this period. By uniting military power with spiritual authority, the small states became kingdoms and the elites within these societies were able to exert more power over their subjects.[49]

By infiltrating the ranks of the *abiru* with men loyal to them, the *abagabekazi* of nineteenth-century Rwanda were able to open up the political system and extend political power beyond simply the *mwami* and his ritualists. They were able to take such steps because Umugabekazi Nyiratunga (1801-1820) politicized the *abiru* by appointing its first female member, Nyiramuhanda, after she sacrificed her infant son to save Mwami Gahindiro during the War of the Ibigina (1796-1801). In proposing such an interpretation, I offer a revision to the Rwandan historiography, which has suggested that political

[48] There are numerous interpretations for when and how the abiru were formed. See Alison Liebhafsky Des Forges, "Two Thunders Cannot Share One Cloud: Joint Rulership in Nineteenth Century Rwanda," presented at the 19th annual meeting of the African Studies Association (Boston, 1976); Vansina, *Antecedents*; also, for commentary as well as the text of important rituals, see Marcel d'Hertefelt and Andre Coupez, *La royauté sacrée de l'ancien Rwanda* (Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1964).
[49] Iris Berger, *Religion and Resistance: East African Kingdoms in the Precolonial Period* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 1981); also, Feierman, *The Shambaa Kingdom*; and, Luc de Heusch, *Le Rwanda et la civilization interlacustre.* (Brussels: Université libre de Bruxelles, Institut de sociologie , 1966).

power became more stabilized through the course of the nineteenth century. Contrary to the common assertion that the reign of Mwami Kigeli IV Rwabugiri was an era of centralization and stability, I argue that his reign represents a decline for ritually-based kingship in Rwanda, and a time during which many groups and individuals were able to contest the power of the monarchy and the court, including not only elite women but also peasants and recently-conquered peoples.[50] Thus instead of a kingship which drew its power from ritual legitimacy, the monarchy came to rely more and more on a combination of intimate connections between clans, and ever-more violent repression of its malcontents and dissenters.

Recent scholarship on precolonial Rwanda lacks any systematic analysis of the gendered dynamics of power in the kingdom. Vansina's comprehensive royal history introduces some of the most important nineteenth-century women, but the emphasis is generally on their proximity to the *mwami* or other powerful men and not as political actors in their own right.[51] Even when scholars have acknowledged the growing power of the *abagabekazi* in the nineteenth century, they have credited this to the increasing influence of the important families, and not to political prowess on the part of the women themselves.[52] David Newbury has emphasized that political legitimacy was based heavily on the performance of annual rituals designed to ensure the continued prosperity and fertility of the nation. These rituals, including the annual *umuganuro* (First Fruits) festival involved participants from around the country, and solidified the sense of belonging to a

[50] It is common practice to refer to bami by their common, or Tutsi, names; in this case, Rwabugiri. See Kagame, Abrégé; also, Alison Liebhafsky Des Forges, *Defeat Is the Only Bad News: Rwanda under Musinga, 1896 -1931* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), originally presented as a dissertation by Des Forges at Yale University in 1972. Vansina argues the centralization thesis as well, but suggests that the centralization "sow[ed] anarchy as it unfold[ed]." Vansina, *Antecedents*, 164.
[51] His notable exception is Kanjogera, Rwabugiri's wife who became *umugabekazi* in 1895.
[52] Des Forges, "Two Thunders," 6.

community in the kingdom.[53] It is even more important, then, to analyze the ways in which elite women were able to manipulate the *abiru* and these rituals in order to secure their own power. These changes destabilized the ritual legitimacy of kingship, but also opened up the ranks of the ritualists to those who were previously excluded from this incredibly influential source of power in the kingdom.[54]

We see evidence of this increase in women's political power beyond simply the *umugabekazi*. The noblewoman Nyiramuhanda was the first and only woman ever initiated into the *abiru* at beginning of the nineteenth century. The century also began with the first of four consecutive powerful female regents, and ended with Umugabekazi Kanjogera bargaining Rwanda's way into German colonialism, solidifying her position as the most powerful figure in a monarchical system in rapid decline. Through the first decade of the twentieth century, Umugabekazi Kanjogera struggled to suppress a religious movement that was led by Muhumusa—who earned legitimacy by claiming to be Mwami Rwabugiri's wife—and dedicated to the worship of the female deity Nyabingi.[55] In just a few decades, the kingdom transformed from one seemingly dominated by men into one in which elite women played a vital role in the official direction of the state, in some cases even eclipsing the men who surrounded them.

Rwandan oral traditions make it clear that women exercised extraordinary political power, and that this power was continuously negotiated and contested throughout the nineteenth century. A gendered history of precolonial Rwanda—that is, one in which the intersections between gender and political power are analyzed—reveals

[53] David S. Newbury, "What Role has Kingship?: An Analysis of the Umuganura ritual of Rwanda as presented in Marcel d'Hertefelt and André Coupez La royauté sacrée de l'ancien Rwanda (1964)," *Africa-Tervuren*. 27 (1981), 89-101; also, Newbury, *Kings and Clans*.
[54] Vansina, *Antecedents*.
[55] Des Forges, *Defeat Is the Only Bad News*.

how power itself, with its ritual foundations, was gendered. Roles within the rituals were prescribed by the *abiru* not only by title or age, but also by sex. The actions required by the *mwami*, his wives, and the *umugabekazi*, for instance, were dictated not only because of their titles, but also based on the ways that power was gendered within the religious traditions of the interlacustrine region.[56] The position of *umugabekazi* was originally conceived as a way to solidify the power of the royal Nyiginya clan. By creating a position of queen mother, the Nyiginya could theoretically guarantee the support of at least one other important family, while simultaneously shielding themselves from any attempts to usurp power. Because of the patriarchal nature of power in precolonial Rwanda, the *mwami* still held ultimate power, as the *mwami* was generally also the head of the lineage.[57] This meant he was theoretically in control of his mother. Also, it was expected that the *umugabekazi* would die well before the *mwami*, leaving him the sole ruler for the rest of his reign. The queen mother position, by its very nature, was derived as one ostensibly equal in power, but that was not meant to be equal in practice because of overarching gender norms both in elite circles and throughout the kingdom. This, of course, did not work out as planned. Three of the four *abagabekazi* in the nineteenth century came from a powerful lineage of the Ega clan. This strengthened and enriched them, and gave Kanjogera the leverage to do the unthinkable in 1896: to overthrow a legitimate, sitting *mwami* and install her own son in his place. The circumstances

[56] As an example, part of the *umuganura* festival involved ritual intercourse between the *mwami* and one of his wives. But because of the emphasis on fertility in this particular set of rituals, the queen had to be a wife who had previously borne a son. The type of intimacy required for this ritual had to be one associated with reproduction because of the nature of the festival. Newbury, "What Role Has Kingship?," 92.

[57] The notable exception to this was in the case of Umugabekazi Nyiramongi and her son, Mwami Rwogera (r. 1846-1860). Nyiramongi's husband, Mwami Gahindiro, named his son Nkusi as the head of lineage, but named Rwogera his successor. This is likely due to mistrust of Nyiramongi and her Abega lineage on the part of Rugaju, who was Gahindiro's abatoni and who functionally ran the kingdom during his reign. Vansina, *Antecedents*, 133.

surrounding this coup, which happened at Rucunshu in December, 1896, forever altered the ritual foundations of the kingdom, and ultimately destroyed them.

Sources and Methodology

The majority of primary sources about the Nyiginya monarchy come from the painstaking work of historians working during the colonial and immediate post-colonial eras, most notably Alexis Kagame and Jan Vansina. There are four main types of oral sources with which historians engage: *Ubwiru* (rituals), *Ubucurabwenge* (dynastic lists), *Ibisigo* (dynastic poetry), and *Ibitéekerezo* (historical narratives). The *ubwiru* are in some ways the most famous of these, but also the most secret. They were memorized by the *abiru* (ritual practitioners), a group that acted both as priests—performing the rituals—as well as a council of advisors to the *mwami* (king), who was the chief ritual practitioner in the kingdom.[58] Court genealogists, the *abacurabwenge*, kept the dynastic lists. The *Ibisigo*, or dynastic poetry, was kept by the *abasizi*, who belonged mostly to the Singa clan. Alexis Kagame belonged to the Singa clan, and recorded these traditions. This gave him access to Mwami Rudahigwa (1931-1959), and to the *abiru*.[59]. It is clear he did

[58] These rituals were compiled and analyzed as they were performed during the colonial period. See André Coupez and Marcel D'Hertefelt, *La royauté sacrée de l'ancien Rwanda : texte, traduction et commentaire de son Rituel*, (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 1964); David Newbury's analysis of the "First Fruits" ritual is important for understanding how these rituals helped to construct community and identity. See Newbury, "What Role Has Kingship?".

[59] As a matridynastic clan, it is unlikely that the Singa were actually part of the *abiru*. Rwandan scholar Rose-Marie Mukarutabana argues that the Singa had a "quasi-monopoly" over the *ibisigo*, dynastic poetry. Personal communication, January 2014. Meanwhile, the incorporation of the *abiru* at Court seems to date from the reign of Gisanura, which Vansina places sometime between 1700 and 1735. The genealogy and dating of the Nyginya Dynasty has been a matter of much discussion among historians of Rwanda. See Léon Delmas, *Généalogies de la noblesse du Ruanda (Les Batutsi)*, (Kabgayi: Vicariat apostolique du Ruanda, 1950); Kagame, *La notion de génération appliquée*, 1959; Bernardin Muzungu, *Histoire du Rwanda précolonial*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003); David Newbury, "Trick Cyclists?," 1994 ; J.K. Rennie, "The Precolonial Kingdom of Rwanda: A Reinterpretation," *Transafrican Journal of History* 2, 2 (1972); and, Jan Vansina, *L'Évolution du royaume Rwanda des origines à 1900*, (Bruxelles: Académie royale des

extensive interviews and perhaps took careful fieldnotes as well.[60] But he never revealed the identities of his informants, nor did he explain their backgrounds.[61] They may have included *ibitéekerezo* or *ubwiru*. It is likely, though, that he relied mostly upon *ibisigo*.[62] This makes a critical analysis of Kagame's work challenging, since it is difficult to know the type of source and from whom it was obtained except in those instances in which Kagame directly attributes information to particular informants.

In comparison, Jan Vansina's work is predominantly based on *ibitéekerezo*.[63] Though these were also somewhat controlled by the Court, they also disseminated throughout the population, since non-elites also worked at the court.[64] Thus there were both official *ibitéekerezo*, as well as popular versions that included personal and regional embellishments. In some ways, Vansina's work built upon Kagame's.[65] But he challenged Kagame's chronology, for example, as well as his interpretation of the older, mythological narratives. Vansina also included regional and local narratives in his

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sciences d'outre-mer, 2000). For more on the incorporation of the *abiru* into the Nyiginya Kingdom, see D. Newbury, "What Role Has Kingship?"; and Vansina, *Antecedents*, 2004, especially Chapter 4.

[60] These notes are reportedly held in the Abbé Alexis Kagame Library in Butare. As of November 2012, they were unavailable to researchers, whether Rwandan or foreign, due to being relocated to a new facility.

[61] Jan Vansina, "Historical Tales (Ibiteekerezo) and the History of Rwanda," *History in Africa* 27 (2000): 375-414.

[62] For more on the differences between oral sources and their interpretations, see Coupez and d'Hertefelt, *La Royauté Sacrée*; and Vansina, "Historical Tales." For some examples and theories on Kagame's sources, see Alexis Kagame and Pierre Charles, *La poésie dynastique au Rwanda, par Alexis Kagame*, [Préface De Pierre Charles.], (Bruxelles: G. Van Campenhout, 1951); and, Alexis Kagame and Gérard Nyilimanzi, *Ibisigo comme source de l'histoire*, (Kigali: Cahiers Lumiere et Societé, 2003).

[63] Vansina contrasts his *ibitéekerezo* with what he refers to as "official histories" offered by court-based collaborators of Peter Schumacher, an early anthropologist who worked in Rwanda. See Vansina, *Antecedents*, 2004, pg. 7-8 and Jan Vansina, *L'Èvolution*; for Schumacher, see Kayijuka, "Lebensgeschichte Des Grossfürsten Kayijuka und Seiner Ahnen Seit Sultan Yuhi Mazimpaka, König Von Ruanda. Von Ihm Selbst Erzählt. Translated by Dr. Peter Schumacher, M.A.," *Mitteilungen der Ausland-Hochschule an der Universität Berlin* 41 (*Afrikanischen Studien*) (1938), 103-61.

[64] The most famous of these is the tanner Gakanisha, who was the sole information for Coupez and Kamanzi's book of *ibitéekerez*o. André Coupez, Th. Kamanzi, and Clément Gakaníisha, *Recits Historiques Rwanda* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 1962). This was also likely the type of story that informed Peter Schumacher's famous narrator Kayijuka, several decades prior to Coupez and Kamanzi. Kayijuka. "Lebensgeschichte."

[65] See Vansina, *Antecedents*, in which Kagame's work is among the most frequently cited sources.

collection of *ibitéekerezo*, which helps to contextualize his monarchical history beyond the Court narratives.[66]

This dissertation relies predominantly on historical narratives as recorded by Vansina and as recounted by Kagame. Both are available in French, but Vansina's collection of *ibitéekerezo* is also available in the original Kinyarwanda. Working with both sets of these, I compared the translation, and used contradictions or questions as a point of departure for interviews with Rwandan scholars and historians. The majority of my interviews were conducted with members of the Inteko y'Umuco (also known as the Rwandan Academy for Language and Culture), as well as the Inteko Izirikana (The Memory Council). Additionally, I was able to have informal conversations with several members of the Faculty of History at the National University of Rwanda. These interviews, which over time took the form of informal discussions, sometimes involving more than one interviewee, usually began with the analysis of a specific *igitéekerezo* (narrative), which would open the door to a further dialogue about the historical actors featured in the story, and often led to differing interpretations of these narratives. In some cases, I simply began by asking my interview partner to translate the Kinyarwanda version of a story into English, through which we could discuss the specific terms used to describe various historical, political, and ritual phenomena.

I use these discussions in concert with my own translations, as well as those produced by my research assistants, Sylvere Mwizerwa and Bridget Mutoni, to create a narrative of a particular event. Where there were inconsistencies or contradictions (which was often), I have endeavored to put those into dialogue with each other, contextualizing

[66] Vansina, "Historical Tales;" also, *Antecedents*, 2004.

the narrative with data from other narratives as well as secondary literature about the region, in an effort to create an interpretation.

While all of my interview partners indicated their enthusiastic willingness to participate in this research, I have attempted to be mindful of the ever-changing political situation in Rwanda, which has become more and more hostile toward researchers, and especially toward historians. For this reason, I have chosen to refer to my interviewees by initials chosen at random, in an effort to protect their anonymity, should the need arise. Where written communication is involved, however, I refer to the correspondent by name, since there is little chance there is not already a government record of such correspondence.

Chapter Outline

This study is divided into four chapters, each broadly concerned with the life and reign of a particular umugabekazi, though there is some overlap due to their (generally) remarkable longevity. Each chapter focuses on a particular aspect of this office, and how it was exercised by the woman who held it. Chapter one begins with an overview of the civil war at the end of the eighteenth century, and a description of the evolution of the kingdom over the previous hundred years. Taking as its subject the Umugabekazi Nyiratunga, ostensible wife of Mwami Sentabyo and mother of Mwami Gahindiro, the chapter explores the role of the queen-regent, and how Nyiratunga was able to use popular notions of widowhood and motherhood to gain support for her somewhat dubious claim to power beginning in 1801. The chapter also introduces the notion of clanship, and

how the Nyiginya were forced to give up a measure of power to the *ibibanda*—the matridynastic clans, from which *abagabekazi* were descended—in order to solidify the kingdom. This power-sharing arrangement was most often between the Nyiginya and the Ega, Nyiratunga's clan.

Chapter two examines the early life and queenship of Umugabekazi Nyiramongi, wife of Mwami Gahindiro and mother of Mwami Rwogera. The central conflict takes place between Nyiramongi and Gahindiro's official lover and advisor, Rugaju. Chapter two analyzes the role of sexual desire and intimacy in the creation of alliances and loyalty, and how the institution of marriage, with its connections to reproduction and the continuation of the lineage tended to give wives the upper hand over other lovers. This chapter also explores how a queen could develop the political and diplomatic skills necessary to become an effective *umugabekazi* after the death of her husband. As Nyiramongi was also a member of the Ega clan, her political maneuvering benefitted not only her own ambitions, but also that of her relatives, including her brother, Rwakagara.

Chapter three is centered on the tumultuous relationships between two abagabekazi and their sons. Umugabekazi Nyiramongi had a notoriously toxic relationship with her son, the Mwami Rwogera, and they spent most of their reign struggling against one another. Their conflict was not merely between the two of them, but also a power struggle between the royal Nyiginya clan and Nyiramongi's Ega clan. Nyiramongi's death put an end to her own ambitions, but paved the way for a major victory for the Ega, led by her brother Rwakagara. Though he backed a new umugabekazi, Murorunkwere, who was from the relatively-weak Kono clan, the Ega were too entrenched to be displaced. Umugabekazi Murorunkwere, whose son Mwami

Rwabugiri was the adopted son of Mwami Rwogera, attempted to rule in the manner of her predecessor. But perceived sexual indiscretions and the immense paranoia of her son soon led to her downfall, and the beginning of Rwabugiri's reign of terror.

Chapter four features the apex of both the power of the *umugabekazi*, and the influence of the Ega clan. Umugabekazi Kanjogera, wife of Mwami Rwabugiri and mother of Mwami Musinga led her family to commit the bloodiest and most infamous coup in Rwandan history: the massacre at Rucunshu in 1896. Though this virtually annihilated Nyiginya hegemony and severely undermined the ritual foundations of the kingdom, it did not solidify Ega rule because of the introduction of German colonial administration to the colonial scene. The kingdom over which Kanjogera and her son Musinga ruled was fundamentally different than that of her predecessors. In addition to wrangling local elites and fighting to keep control over the territory her husband conquered during his tumultuous reign, Kanjogera had also to deal with increasing encroachments by missionaries, as well as attempts by various groups of European colonialists to claim land she saw as rightfully part of her kingdom. The deal she made with the Germans in 1896 may well have preserved that kingdom in principle. But in ceding some control to them, she opened the door for the eventual domination of Rwanda by first the Germans and then the Belgians. Her reign, however, offers valuable insight into the enormous possibility conferred by a legitimate claim of royal marriage and inheritance. This is made most clearly in Kanjogera's reaction to the rebellion of Muhumusa/Muserekande, who claimed to be a wife of Mwami Rwabugiri, and whose son she claimed was his chosen heir. By focusing her energies on defeating Muhumusa and other Nyiginya-related agitators, and accepting the advice and support of the Germans—albeit cautiously—we understand that Umugabekazi Kanjogera, as well as

most of her royal court, continued to view fellow elites as the more potent threat to their power. By the time colonial administration was transferred to the Belgians in 1917, it became apparent that this was not the case. But of course by that point, it was too late.

Ultimately, this study makes three significant interventions. First, it analyzes the relationship between kingship and clanship in the interlacustrine region by examining the Nyiginya kingdom through a gendered lens during its most tumultuous century. Second, it reexamines the evolution of social identity and interaction in what would become Rwanda by deemphasizing "ethnicity," and focusing rather on the kinship and clientship arrangements that created a cohesive social and political unit. Finally, by displacing Nyiginya hegemony in the monarchy in the late nineteenth century, and instead highlighting the struggles between clans, this project reconceptualizes the initiation of German colonial administration as part of a calculated risk on the part of the Ega to bolster their authority, just as the Nyiginya had done with the incorporation of the *ibibanda* into the monarchical structure in the eighteenth century. By grounding the origins of colonialism in an established pattern of governance and state-building in the kingdom, we are better able to comprehend the rationality at work in these decisions, and deepen our own understanding of colonialism as part of a variable and negotiated relationship between different European groups, African elites, and the larger population.

Chapter 1

The Rise of the Regent: Joint-Rulership and Great Family Politics, 1796-1820

When Mwami Sentabyo ascended to power in 1796, it plunged the Nyiginya Kingdom into civil war. Sentabyo was a son of Mwami Kigeli III Ndabarasa, whose rule Vansina dates from 1786-1796. Ndabarasa was a *mwami* of a different time; his rule was augmented by other elites, but he was not constrained by them. In order to protect himself from potential challengers, he kept his sons away from court, giving them armies to rule on the frontiers. His great favorite, Rukari of Muhabura, was descended from an unimpressive lineage, meaning he owed his rapid rise to Ndabarasa personally.[1] In this way, Ndabarasa solidified his own power by keeping his plans for who was to serve as his successor ambiguous and delegating power to many sons. When he died unexpectedly in 1796, the kingdom was not prepared.

As was customary in the Nyiginya monarchy, Mwami Ndabarasa whispered the name of his successor to members of the *abiru*—a council of ritual specialists at court—from his deathbed. That successor, at least as we now understand it, was Sentabyo, who became Mibambwe III Sentabyo. Mwami Sentabyo found that, upon ascension to the throne, he was immediately at war. The kingdom's loyalties were divided between Sentabyo and two of his brothers, collectively known as the "Ibigina," or "the color of a flood of blood."[2] Though he was able to weaken his brother Gatarabuhura, and though he

[1] Ndabarasa and Rukari were lovers.
[2] Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 109.

had the support of the Tsobe ritualists, who were responsible for enthroning the new *mwami*, there were simply too many armies arrayed against him for an outright victory. In the midst of all of this, a smallpox epidemic struck in 1801, and Mwami Sentabyo, still quite young, died with no proclaimed heir.

Into this atmosphere of chaos and uncertainty appeared Nyiratunga, a woman of a prestigious lineage of the Ega clan. Nyiratunga would rescue the kingdom from the abyss by proclaiming that her infant son, Gahindiro, was the child of Sentabyo, whom she had married in secret. Nyiratunga's claim to power—for the enthronement of her infant son would mean her own ascension as *umugabekazi* (queen mother)—began a century of dominance by regent-mothers, whose authority stemmed from their roles as wives and mothers. Though joint-rule in Rwanda predated the nineteenth century, the innovations of Nyiratunga and her successors would change the nature of authority and legitimacy in the kingdom for the rest of its existence. Her reign constituted the beginning of Ega dominance of the position of *umugabekazi*, which would challenge the royal hegemony of the Nyiginya. But her exercise of power is also important: she was careful to consistently portray herself as no more than a grieving widow and loving mother. Her performance of these socially-acceptable roles was effective, because the historical narratives and dynastic poetry describe her in these terms, and never deviate from them. By maintaining an uncontroversial self-presentation, Umugabekazi Nyiratunga was able to enact some fundamental changes to the structure of ritual kingship. Specifically, she began the politicization of the *abiru*, the council of ritual specialists who served the *mwami* and assisted his fulfillment of his role as chief ritual practitioner in the kingdom. Thus Nyiratunga's mothering labor served as the basis on which she enacted political power.

Cycles, Kings, and Gateways

The civil war that inaugurated the nineteenth century was in many ways the result of a century of centralization and change within the Nyiginya kingdom. Scholars of the kingdom usually date its historical beginnings to the reign of Ruganzu Ndori, a figure most agree was an actual historical person.[3] Chronology, including specific dates of reigns and events, is a notoriously sticky subject for historians of Rwanda and its antecedents. Alexis Kagame, historian, philosopher, poet, and priest, provides an origin date for the kingdom that is much earlier than subsequent scholars.[4] The main criticism of Kagame from Jan Vansina, J. K. Rennie, and David Newbury, whose work all wrestles with the issue of chronology, is that Kagame accepts as historical fact many stories that are likely myths that appeared much later, and that were probably incorporated into the corpus of court oral traditions and poetry by monarchs seeking to bolster their own legitimacy.[5]

A prime example of this is the institution of the cycle of regal names for the *mwami* and *umugabekazi*. Though sometimes projected further into the past, the

[3] Though the king lists trace the lineage of kings further back than Ndori, most scholars agree that these earlier kings were mythological. For an excellent synopsis, see Rose Marie Mukarutabana, "Gakondo: The Royal Lists," http://www.dlblanc.com/Gakondo/en/Lists/Genealogy.php, last accessed 3 February 2014.
[4] Alexis Kagame, *La notion de génération appliquée à la généalogie dynastique et à l'histoire du Rwanda des X-XI siècles à nos jours, par l'Abbé Alexis Kagame* (Bruxelles, 1959); see also, Alexis Kagame, *Un Abrégé de l'ethno-histoire du Rwanda, T. 1,* (Butare, Rwanda: Editions universitaires du Rwanda, 1972).
[5] See David Newbury, "Trick Cyclists? Reconceptualizing Rwandan Dynastic Chronology," *History in Africa* 21, (1994): 191-217; J. K. Rennie, "The Precolonial Kingdom of Rwanda: A Reinterpretation," *Transafrican Journal of History* 2, 2 (1972); and, J. K.Rennie, "The Banyoro Invasions and Interlacustrine Chronology," (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1973); also, Vansina, *Antecedents* 2004.

institutionalization of this cycle seems to date from the reign of Mwami Cyilima II Rujugira, who took power in around 1766 by overthrowing Mwami Karemera Rwaka.[6] According to this cycle, which was part of the "path of the watering," the inaugural cycle of names would proceed as Cyirima, Kigeli, Mibambwe, and Yuhi, and would be repeated on odd-numbered cycles. The second cycle—Mutara, Kigeli, Mibambwe, and Yuhi—would follow for the even-numbered cycles.[7] The name under which a *mwami* ruled predestined a particular kind of reign. It determined where he could be inaugurated, where he could travel, and his ritual responsibilities. It also determined how and when his body would be preserved and buried.[8]

For our purposes, understanding this cycle of names, and the predestination they implied is important because of Nyiratunga's infant, who would become Mwami Yuhi IV Gahindiro. That he was a Yuhi gives us important insight as to what was either expected of him, or perhaps how his reign was understood by later historians. The role of a Yuhi was to guarantee the continuity of the kingdom. A Yuhi was not meant to be an adventurer, or a *mwami* who conquered new territory, or even really a warrior. Rather, he was supposed to reassert the divinity of the kingdom, keeping the "fire of Gihanga," which ensured the perpetuation of the kingdom.[9] This ritual was performed in the heartland of the Nyiginya Kingdom, Nduga, to which all Yuhi kings were bound. It celebrated the predominant clans, especially those that could provide *abagabekazi* (queen

[6] As part of his persuasive argument to this effect, Vansina provides the evidence that Mt. Rutare, which was an important ritual site in the "path of the watering" that necessitated this cycle of names, was not incorporated into the Nyiginya Kingdom until the middle or end of Rujugira's reign. See Vansina, *Antecedents*, 93.
[7] Vansina, Antecedents, 92.
[8] For more detailed explanation and analyses, see André Coupez, and Marcel d'Hertefelt. *La royauté sacrée de l'ancien Rwanda : Texte, traduction et commentaire de son rituel* Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 1964; and, Alexis Kagame, "Le Code Ésotérique De La Dynastie Du Rwanda," *Zaïre*, 1 (1947), 363-86; also, Vansina, *Antecedents*.
[9] Coupez and d'Hertefelt, *La Royauté*, 49.

mothers): the Ega, the Kono, the Ha, and the Gesera.[10] In short, a Yuhi king symbolized the renewal of the kingdom, and a reaffirmation of its history and legacy: exactly what was needed after five years of continuous internecine warfare.

Gahindiro's name is significant here as well. In Kinyarwanda, it literally means "the closing of a gate."[11] Gahindiro is a gateway: he is the way out of the civil war. He represents the beginning of a new era of kingship, in which the *mwami* was much more dependent on and beholden to the so-called "Great Families," and most especially upon Nyiratunga's lineage of the Ega clan. He is the gateway to a period of immense social change, including the exacerbation of the rift between rich and poor, but represents the closing of an era of internal conflict within the royal Nyiginya.

The reconception of royal history after the reign of Mwami Rujugira helped to relegitimize the Nyiginya Dynasty. Rujugira's father, Mwami Yuhi III Mazimpaka, is a complex figure in the oral traditions, and particularly as he is described in the *ibitéekerezo* that Vansina collected in the late 1950s and early 1960s. On the one hand, he left a strong legacy of nearly one hundred sons, many new armies, and strengthened claims to territory in both Gatsibo and Ndorwa (both to the north of today's central Rwanda, with Ndorwa spreading into present-day Uganda). On the other hand, his royal paranoia is legendary. The ties to Gatsibo and Ndorwa were made while Mazimpaka staved off a rebellion from his own brother, and when he finally secured his throne, he massacred his brother and all his brother's sons, because they did not support him. [12] He also met with significant opposition from both his mother—an *umugabekazi* of the Kono

[10] Ibid., 54-67.
[11] For more on this, see Rose-Marie Mukarutabana, "Gakondo: The Royal Myths," http://www.dlblanc.com/Gakondo/en/Myths/index.php, last accessed 14 January 2014.
[12] *Historique et chronologie du Ruanda* (Kabgayi: Vicariat apostolique du Ruanda, 1954), 181.

clan—and two of his wives. All three tried to have him overthrown at various times, leading to not only their individual deaths, but the persecution of their families.[13]

The picture of Mazimpaka is that of a tragic madman.[14] Though he held much promise early on, it is clear that opposition from many corners made him paranoid, and threatened the security of the kingdom. As I discussed above, this would have been unacceptable for Yuhi king, whose reign was meant to stabilize the kingdom. Mazimpaka, then, represented a failure of a type of kingship that had been developing in the Nyiginya Kingdom since the time of Ruganzu Ndori; a kingship centered on the person of the king, and in which other elites were rivals. Mwami Mazimpaka's son Rwaka, who acted as co-ruler for a time and inherited the kingdom after his father's somewhat-untimely death, was only ever questionably *mwami*.[15]

Rujugira was probably a son of Mazimpaka; there are certainly plenty of traditions that label him as such, and explain that due to Mazimpaka's madness and paranoia, Rujugira fled to Gisaka (in present-day eastern Rwanda) to escape his father's violent tendencies.[16] Yet others contend that Rujugira was not a son of Mazimpaka at all,

[13] Léon Delmas, *Généalogies de la noblesse du Ruanda: (Les Batutsi)* (Kabgayi: Vicariat apostolique du Ruanda, 1950), 57; also, Vansina, *Antecedents*, 101. There was only one other Kono woman to serve as *umugabekazi* in the Nyiginya Kingdom; this was Murorunkwere, the mother of Mwami Kigeli IV Rwabugiri (r. c. 1865-1895). For more on her reign, as well as parallels between these two cases, see below chapter 3.

[14] He also appears to have been stricken with yaws or syphilis (the French is *variole*, which can be translated as either smallpox or yaws, but also occasionally can describe syphilis. Given the emphasis on increasing paranoia and other signs of mental instability, it can be assumed Mazimpaka contracted either yaws or syphilis, since smallpox does not cause these behavioral changes).

[15] For Rwaka as co-ruler, see Delmas, *Généalogies*, 189; and, Kagame, *Abrégé*, T. 1, 130-34; also, Kayijuka. "Lebensgeschichtedes Grossfürsten Kayijuka und seiner Ahnen seit Sultan Yuhi Mazimpaka, König von Ruanda. Von ihm selbst Erzählt. Translated by Dr. Peter Schumacher, M.A." *Mitteilungen der Ausland-Hochschulean der Universität Berlin* 41 (*Afrikanischen Studien*) (1938): 132. For questions about his legitimacy, see Kagame, *Abrégé*, T. 1, 103-31; also, Vansina, *Antecedents*, 257, note 9.

[16] The Jan Vansina Collection Ibitéekerezo: Historical Narratives from Rwanda: A Collection of Texts and Translations, 1957-1961 (Chicago: CRL-CAMP Dept. of Photoduplication, University of Chicago Library, 1973), Mazimpaka file, T, nos. 2 and 8; also, Kagame, *Abrégé*, T. 1, 126. Also, Kagame features a poem allegedly written by Mazimpaka himself regarding this incident. Alexis Kagame and Pierre Charles, *La*

but rather a foreigner who came to Gisaka as part of the neighboring kingdom of Karagwe's invasion of the former.[17] Regardless of how he got to Gisaka, what appears to be true is that while he was there, he married a woman from the Gesera clan, who in turn gave birth to Ndabarasa. The Gesera, who were a prominent clan in the Nyiginya kingdom, supported Rujugira's return to Nduga. Rujugira, who was getting older by this point (around the time of the death/flight of Rwaka, c. 1766), sent his son Ndabarasa to meet with the eldest son of Rwaka, who gave Ndabarasa the Kalinga, the royal drum indicating monarchical and ritual legitimacy. Ndabarasa encouraged his father to take it, and to restore the kingdom. Whatever else he had done, Rwaka had alienated most of the elite families, including his mother's Kono clan, as well as the Ha and Ega.[18] The latter often provided *abagabekazi*, but Rwaka's reign went against tradition here. His *umugabekazi*—who he chose after the death of his mother—was descended from the Nyiginya, and an *umuyango* (lineage) close to that of the royal lineage. This decision on the part of Mazimpaka (or Rwaka himself, if he took the throne without his father's blessing, as Rujugira's supporters would like us to believe) caused a rift between the Nyiginya and the other elite clans that usually helped to support it. Because of this alienation, these other powerful clans, with their wealth and armies, were ripe for the picking.

Rujugira took advantage of this alienation, setting aside his maternal aunt (who originally served as his *umugabekazi*), and instead chose Kirongoro, daughter of Kagoro

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poésie dynastique au Rwanda, par Alexis Kagame,... [Préface de Pierre Charles.] (Bruxelles: G. Van Campenhout, 1951), 143, no. 22.

[17] Both oral traditions from Rwanda and royal poetry from Gisaka support this thesis, which is also Vansina's position. See Vansina collection, Mazimpaka file, T, no. 10; and, Kagame, *Poésie dynastique*, 155, no. 45. Also, Vansina, *Antecedents*, 258, note 15.

[18] He either had his mother killed or she committed suicide in order to appease him. Either way, it angered her family.

of Nyamuhenda, of the Ega clan. This secured his alliance with the Ega, Ha, and Kono, because it restored the traditional *ibibanda* (matridynastic clans) to what they believed was their rightful place. To further cement this, Rujugira's two favorite sons, Gihana and Ndabarasa, also married Ega women from the lineage of the prestigious warrior Makara. Makara's lineage would become the most powerful in the country, because it would eventually give birth to most of the *abagabekazi* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The woman from this lineage who Rujugira's son Gihana married was Nyiratunga.

The rules of succession in the Nyiginya Kingdom were complex. A *mwami*'s heir needed to be born of a wife from one of the *ibibanda*, but this was just the first requirement. In most cases, the firstborn son would not succeed his father; rather, it was required that any potential *umugabekazi* bear more than one son. This requirement also often led to the naming of an heir from among second or third sons. This appears to be the case with Ndabarasa. He succeeded his father as *mwami*, but it is his brother Gihana's line that may have been more significant for the kingdom. Gihana married Nyiratunga before he went into battle and was killed. Whether she actually married Sentabyo is questionable; therefore, the paternity of her son, Gahindiro, who would become *mwami*, is uncertain. This provides a further example of why analyzing the role of elite women in the creation and perpetuation of clanship is important. The future of the entire kingdom ultimately came down to Nyiratunga's claim over the paternity of her son. In order to be believable, her performance of widowhood and motherhood had to be above reproach.

The *Umugabekazi* in Theory and Practice

The position of *umugabekazi* (queen mother) was originally conceived as a way to solidify the power of the royal Nyiginya clan, sometime in the mid-seventeenth century, and likely as a result of internal conflict between the Nyiginya and the clans that would become the *ibibanda*. By creating a position of queen mother, the Nyiginya could guarantee the support of at least one other important family, while simultaneously shielding themselves from attempts by other powerful clans to usurp power. Because of the patriarchal nature of power in precolonial Rwanda, the *mwami* still held ultimate power, as the *mwami* was generally also the head of the lineage.[19] This meant he was theoretically in control of his mother. Also, it was expected that the *umugabekazi* would die well before the *mwami,* leaving him the sole ruler for the rest of his reign. The queen mother position, by its very nature, was derived as one theoretically equal in power, but that was not meant to be equal in practice because of overarching gender norms both in elite circles and throughout the kingdom.

It is difficult to trace specifically the origins of the *umugabekazi* in the development of the Nyiginya Kingdom. The traditions seem to agree that these origins are somewhat mythological in origin, dating to the reign of Mwami Gihanga, the "Founder Mwami," but also the son of either Shyerezo (translated both "Beginning" and "End"), or Kazika Muntu ("The Root of Man"), both of which were mythological sons of the mythological kings descended from *Imana*, "the heavens" in ancient Rwandan cosmology.[20] Gihanga, it is generally agreed, was not necessarily an actual person, but

[19] The notable exception to this was in the case of Umugabekazi Nyiramongi and her son, Mwami Rwogera (r. 1846-1860). Nyiramongi's husband, Mwami Gahindiro, named his son Nkusi as the head of lineage, but named Rwogera his successor. For more on this, Vansina, *Antecedents*, 133.

[20] There are various accounts of these individuals, and competing analyses. See Alexis Kagame, *La divine pastorale traduction française, par l'auteur, de la première veillée d'une épopée écrite en langue ruandaise, etc.* (Bruxelles: Kraus Reprint, 1952); and, Alexis Kagame, *La naissance de l'univers: Deuxième veillée de la divine pastorale* (Bruxelles: Editions du Marais, 1955). For further analysis, see

rather a mythological figure whose life helps to illustrate later social and political conventions.[21]

In the Gihanga myths, the stories shift from a focus on those mythological kings who were descended from heaven to Gihanga and his earthbound wives. As Rwandan scholar Rose-Marie Mukarutabana explains, the number four is symbolically important in these myths, giving later readers an indication of why the number remains so central to later developments in kingship.

> Every king had to re-enact this establishment: during the first four months of his reign, he has to build four ritual "capitals," really a homestead for four "ritual wives" (Kagame calls these "concubines" but he was really trying to convince the missionaries that the king was quasi-monogamous and therefore quasi-Christian).
>
> The kings of the third dynasty succeed each other in a cycle of four: Cyirima [Cyilima] (or Mutara) - Kigeri - Mibambwe – Yuhi
>
> Their corresponding mothers are supposed to belong to four "matridynastic" clans: …Ha, Gesera, Kono, Ega.
> These mothers are the four "pillars" of kingship.
>
> You note that three of these are *Ibimanuka* (author note: "the descents," those who descended from heaven to *Urwanda*, the earth) - Abaha, Abakono and Abega - respectively descendants of Muha, Mukono and Serwega, these being three sons of Mututsi, son of Nkuba Shyerezo, the King of Heaven.
>
> In the early days, when Urwanda (here meaning the earth) was governed by these divine kings, the members of the male side of kingship married their divine relatives, the daughters of the three sons of Mututsi, or the female line of kingship. At the time of Divine King Kazi, Gihanga's father, the "Earthfound" (*Abasangwabutaka*) had sufficiently evolved, at least in their higher ranks, to produce marriageable daughters: Kazi therefore married Nyirarukangaga, the daughter of local king Nyamigezi, of the Abazigaba, then a lineage of the Abasinga clan. She was the mother of Gihanga, and first QM of the second dynasty.[22]

Rose-Marie Mukarutabana, "The Myth of Gihanga," http://www.dlblanc.com/Gakondo/en/Myths/Gihanga.php, last accessed 14 January 2014. And also Vansina, *Antecedents*, 217-20.

[21] See Vansina, *Antecedents*, 217-18

[22] Rose-Marie Mukarutabana, personal communication, January 2014.

It is probably no accident that during Rujugira's consolidation of power, and realignment of the rituals of kingship, the *ibibanda*—Ega, Kono, Ha, and Gesera—played a large role in securing his reign. No accident either that he set aside his maternal aunt—who was not from one of the *ibibanda*—and took an adoptive Ega *umugabekazi*.[23]

Further, this demonstrates how Mazimpaka's instability and paranoia had weakened the monarchy. We can speculate on the actual origins of the position of the *umugabekazi*, but there is little in the traditions that can illuminate this, particularly after Rujugira's innovations in the mid-to-late eighteenth century—particularly the adoption of the cycle of regnal names, which streamlined the official court histories and institutionalized the idea that the kingdom had existed in an unbroken royal line from Gihanga to Rujugira.[24] The impact of this new alliance between Nyiginya and Ega was profound: six of the eight subsequent *abagabekazi* came from the Ega clan, and specifically from the Abakagara lineage.[25] This lineage constituted both the most important supporters and biggest threat to the Nyiginya Dynasty.

Makara's lineage raised its profile even more when Kirongoro was named Rujugira's adoptive *umugabekazi*.[26] In such a position, she was able to recommend

[23] There does not seem to be any indication of what clan and lineage Tulira, Rujugira's maternal aunt, belonged to, other than that it was not one of the ibibanda. See Delmas, *Généalogies*.
[24] Because the traditions were realigned to fit Rujugira's claims, it was much more convenient that it appear the ibibanda had ruled alongside the Nyiginya since the beginning of time.
[25] I count Kanjogera twice, since she served as *umugabekazi* to both Rutarindwa (r. 1895-1896) and Musinga (r. 1896-1931). That she was instrumental in the plot to overthrow and murder the former does not negate her assuming the role.
[26] The *umugabekazi* was usually the biological mother of the *mwami*, unlike many other African societies. If the *mwami*'s mother had died by the time of his installation, he chose another woman, usually a close maternal relative, for the position, which was ritually important. Rujugira's choice of a woman to whom he was not actually related (or, at least, does not appear to have been related) is instructive as to the perilous political circumstances in which he may have found himself, either as the legitimate son of a king who alienated allies with his paranoia, the legitimate brother of a king who alienated valuable allies by being born to a non-ibibanda mother and not adopting an appropriate *umugabekazi* himself, or, even more, as a

husbands for Rujugira's daughters (as well as other royal women), and wives for Rujugira's sons, including his two favorites, Gihana and Ndabarasa. In both of these cases, she chose women from her own lineage. Since it seems that by the time Rujugira assumed his kingship he had already designated—or at least implied—that Ndabarasa would be his successor, this move on Kirongoro's part laid a potential path to dominance for her lineage, even though Ndabarasa's mother was a Gesera.[27] Because arranging marriages for the sons and daughters of her family was part of an *umugabekazi*'s duty, it put these women in a position of wielding significant power over who would inherit, and which lineages would feed into the royal line. A politically-savvy woman in this position, who retained an allegiance to her natal clan instead of adopting her husband's (as was assumed and intended), could ensure that her lineage was enriched through these marriages. Women assumed membership in their husband's clan through marriage, according to laws of patrilocality.[28] Though anthropological data produced during the colonial era provide important information about general understandings and expectations of marriage, these generalizations do not offer insights into the actual lived experience of marriage, especially for women. Helen Codere's collection of autobiographies from the first half of the twentieth century perhaps comes closest to addressing this gap in our knowledge, but even she did not ask specific questions about

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foreigner who claimed the rule of the Nyiginya kingdom and wanted to legitimize himself as wholly as possible.

[27] Ndabarasa's mother—Rujugira's wife—was the Gesera woman from Gisaka that Rujugira married before invading/liberating Nduga from Rwaka. By ensuring that Ndabarasa married a woman from her lineage, Kirongoro did her best to ensure that her line would thrive. Later *abagabekazi* would use this same tactic: Nyiramongi saw to it that her son, Rwogera, married only women from her lineage as well, other than for ritual purposes.

[28] Alexis Kagame, *Les Organisations Socio-Familiales De L'ancien Rwanda* (Brussels: Academie des sciences coloniales, 1954), 170-72. See also Helen F. Codere, *The Biography of an African Society: Rwanda 1900-1960: Based on Forty-Eight Rwandan Autobiographies* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 1973). Marriage is discussed within many of the autobiographies, but probably most relevant to this context are the accounts of the three Tutsi noblewomen, pgs. 147-77.

post-nuptial allegiances. But based on the behaviors of the *abagabekazi*, beginning at least with Kirongoro during the reign of Rujugira, there seems to be at least circumstantial evidence that these women consciously used their ability to arrange marriages to bolster their own *umuyango*'s (lineage) access to monarchical power.

Ndabarasa's death, however, led to civil war. His sons, the Ibigina, fought against one another. Though Sentabyo was installed as *mwami*, his brothers did not accept him, nor did Ndabarasa's great favorite and advisor Rukari, who aided Sentabyo's brother Gatarabuhura.[29] It initially appeared that Gatarabuhura would emerge victorious. But in the midst of this chaos, Barinyonza, another son of Ndabarasa, colluded with the chief Nkebya to produce Nyiratunga, a widow of Ndabarasa's brother Gihana. Barinyonza was part of Makara's lineage, as was Nyiratunga. It seems, then, that Kirongoro's planted seeds finally bore fruit. Nyiratunga had with her the infant Gahindiro, who they claimed was the son of Sentabyo, gotten in secret on his aunt just before his death. Nyiratunga's husband Gihana, the son of the great Rujugira, had died as "liberator" in Burundi.[30]

There are many ways to interpret this episode, but it seems that any reasonable analysis must take into account both the ritual and inter-familial politics involved here. Sentabyo died in 1801 after a bitter civil war within his own family. His entire reign was defined by internal strife, as well as a disastrous drought. Though he was a Mibambwe *mwami*, and his reign one of those that should have yielded territory through conquest for

[29] Vansina collection, Gahindiro file, T, 7.
[30] "Liberators" or *abatabazi* were warriors who let themselves be killed in battle as a sacrifice to ensure victory. Following their deaths, it was revealed that there had been prophesies foreseeing their demise, which would protect the kingdom from their enemies. Vansina argues that this idea was created by ritual practitioners (probably *abiru*) for the occasion of Gihana's death during the ill-fated campaign in Burundi, and applied retroactively to other instances. See Vansina, *Antecedents*, 116. For a possible etymology of the term in its historical context, see David Lee Schoenbrun, *The Historical Reconstruction of Great Lakes Bantu Cultural Vocabulary: Etymologies and Distributions* (Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 1997).

the Nyiginya Kingdom, it did not. From a ritual perspective, Imana (the heavens) seemed to have decreed that he was not worthy to be *mwami*, and that a new ritual king was needed to take his place. The logical choice was his brother, Gatarabuhura, who did not have the support of the Ega. Rather, it appears, his brother Barinyonza thought it was better that a *mwami* unencumbered by the civil war should take power. And all the better if his famous and well-respected mother, the widow of the great *umutabazi* (liberator) Gihana, should rule as regent until he gained his majority.

Nyiratunga had the perfect pedigree for the position of a regent. Her Ega lineage, the Abakagara, was the most influential in the country outside of the Nyiginya. She had been married to a son of the powerful Rujugira. Her husband was famous for sacrificing himself for the good of the kingdom. And now she had secretly given birth to a child, Gahindiro, who could close out the tumultuous cycle started by Rujugira, and return the kingdom to stability and fertility. And it was thus that Nyiratunga was presented to the kingdom: the grieving widow, the courageous mother, the wise regent.

An Unlikely Savior: Nyiramuhanda and the Defeat of the *Ibigina*

The royal ascension of Nyiratunga and Gahindiro reads more like an action-thriller than the average political history. A midnight attack, a case of mistaken identity, a mother's tragic sacrifice, and the joyous restoration of the rightful heir to his father's throne make for excellent drama. Combined with Nyiratunga's already-established reputation as the faithful widow of the kingdom's liberator, these elements combined

created a narrative that captured the imaginations of the people, and helped to stabilize the Nyiginya kingdom after years of brutal civil war.

In the aftermath of Sentabyo's death, apparently there were no heirs. Sentabyo died very young of smallpox, probably in his early 20s, and it remains unclear whether he had married.[31] His uncle Baryinyonza, a son of Ndabarasa, in concert with another chief, presented to the *abiru* the widow Nyiratunga and her young son, Gahindiro. According to Kayijuka, Peter Schumacher's main informant, Gahindiro could not yet walk, indicating that he was an infant.[32] Though the *abiru* and others at court seemed to accept Baryinyonza's story, which was ostensibly supported by Nyiratunga herself, the rest of Baryinyonza's brothers, the Ibigina, did not. They began to plot a way to kill Gahindiro and Nyiratunga, effectively clearing the path for Gatarabuhura finally to take power.

Luckily, the servant Nyiramuhanda was at the time serving one of the Ibigina and overheard the plot. Kayijuka, Schumacher's informant, describes her as coming from Gishari, which Vansina argues probably refers to an area west of Bwisha and the volcanoes, in the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo.[33] This region has mythological ties to the origins of Rwanda and its founder, Gihanga, who supposedly allied himself to the Renge, a Singa lineage from Gishari, through marriage. Kayijuka

[31] The *ibitéekerezo* were divided on this issue.
[32] Some of Vansina's sources disagree. According to one, Gahindiro was born before the death of Ndabarasa, which would mean that by the time of Sentabyo's death, the child would have been at least 5 or 6 years old. See Vansina collection, Gahindiro file, T, 7. The age of Gahindiro is important, because if he had been born before Ndabarasa's death, there is a chance that he could actually have been the son of Nyiratunga's husband Gihana. Without knowing her age when she married Gihana, when exactly he died, or how old she was at Gahindiro's succession, it is difficult to speculate. Vansina seems to accept Kayijuka's version of events, referring to the child Gahindiro as a "baby." Vansina, *Antecedents*, 141.
[33] Vansina, *Antecedents*, 122. For more on exchange between central Rwanda and the regions to its west during this period, see David S. Newbury, "Bunyabungo: The Western Frontier in Rwanda, Ca. 1750-1850," in *The Land Beyond the Mists: Essays on Identity and Authority in Precolonial Congo and Rwanda*, edited by David S. Newbury (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 204-28.

claimed to be a descendent of this line.[34] It is noteworthy in this case because of the role Nyiramuhanda played in securing Gahindiro's ascent to the throne.

According to Kayijuka, Nyiramuhanda was sent by her father Muhanod from Gishari to central Rwanda, as part of the wedding entourage of one Nyabuhoro. It was Nyabuhoro who would fulfill the role of the original bride from Gishari, and who married the *mwami* as a ritual queen.[35] When they arrived, Nyiramuhanda oversaw the transfer of the cattle tax to Mbyayingabo, who seems to have been a chief of some kind. There is little about him in any of the sources, except as he relates to Nyiramuhanda or their son, Nyarwaya, who would become an important *mwiru* (ritual practitioner) in Gahindiro's court.[36]

Kayijuka's story about their meeting, and Nyiramuhanda's role in the drama that would unfold, is quite romantic. It seems that while exchanging milk, which was the cattle tax, they "developed an affinity" for another and were married. She bore him two sons: Nyarwaya and Rubanzangabo. The former became famous for his role at court, particularly the part he played in various intrigues between Gahindiro's advisor Rugaju and Gahindiro's wife Nyiramongi. The latter, however, is the more important for this story, because it was Nyiramuhanda's sacrifice of her youngest son that ensured Gahindiro's accession of the throne.

The story, as narrated by Kayijuka, played out thus: Nyiramuhanda, according to her status as Mbyayingabo's wife, served at the royal court, which at that time was

[34] Kayijuka, *Lebensgeschichte*, 140.
[35] There were many types of queens who performed various roles in the kingdom. Those married to *bami* for other than ritual purposes were called *abamikazi*, literally, "the woman of the king."
[36] He also appears to have been Gahindiro's lover, at least for a time. See below chapter 2; also, Kayijuka, 144, which says, "Er war ein besonderer Freund des Gahindiro…"

divided between the Ibigina, depending on one's allegiance. Although Kayijuka and other storytellers insist on her loyalty to Sentabyo, she seems to have been in the position to overhear a plot by one of the Ibigina to murder Gahindiro and Nyiratunga, though perhaps this speaks more to her husband's loyalties than to her own. Because of her devotion to Sentabyo, she went immediately to Nyiratunga to inform her. Since it was too late to flee, Nyiramuhanda tricked the Ibigina into attacking a woman and child whom they assumed to be the royal mother and son. In this way, their treachery and brutality would be exposed, and the true king and his mother could emerge.

Nyiramuhanda's son Rubanzangabo was just about the same age as Gahindiro, and as a loyal servant of the true king, Nyiramuhanda offered up his life, so that Gahindiro might live. Nyiramuhanda, according to Kyijuka, said: "Here you see my son Rubanzangabo, he is just as big as Gahindiro so that we can use his clothes. Further, we must find a woman of your size; you two should sleep on a straw bed, and we will soon see if they set up with the intention of killing you. If my son has to die, that doesn't have anything to do with it: then the King has sacrified (sacrificed?) his life so that we can secure the victory."[37] Nyiratunga reluctantly agreed to the plan, and sent her maid, Kiyange, to sleep with the child Rubanzangabo. Then:

> After midnight the conspirators snuck in during the hour of the first rooster crow. … The night watchmen did not move, because they had become traitors. Nyiratunga and Nyiramuhanda observed everything, they did not sleep. The conspirators penetrated the premises and drew their swords. They cut Rubanzangabo, who they thought was Gahindiro, in two, and stabbed Kiyange, who they thought was Nyiratunga. They waited until the bodies were cold, and then celebrated their victory. They had the right to crown their selected Gatarabuhura in the morning. They lived at Mwendo, in the direction of Tambwe. Gahindiro was in the royal residence in Butare, Nyamagana, in the countryside Ruhango, where there is now the Ettapenlager. The

[37] Kayijuka, *Lebensgeschichte*, 141-42. Translation by Carolyn Morgan.

> Bigina spent the night in the most cheerful mood and considered what they wanted to do it in the morning at the coronation.[38]

With this act of violence, the *Ibigina* had revealed their intentions (?). Gahindiro was safe at the main royal residence in Butare. In the morning, he and Nyiratunga emerged unscathed, and the royal drums sounded, heralding the health of the king. The Ibigina laughed that the *abiru* were mistaken, and that they must just assume that all women look alike. Nyiratunga continued to fear for her son's life, and told Nyiramuhanda that she wanted to flee with him. Nyiramuhanda put her foot down.

> "You are wrong/You're crazy! The people as a whole do not deny the king, many of them are devoted to him. Leave me alone! I want to prove it to you." She rushes out to the milk tent [Melktenne], they leave her with the alarm drum, she twirls the drumstick and shouts: "You all, royalist subjects, arise and destroy the Biginia-Traitors of Mwendo!" Dust swirls around, all the people rushed by; the spears fall and drink blood like water. The leader of this crowd was an uncle of Gahindiro, Bar[y]inyonza, son of Kigeri-Ndabarasa; he joined himself with another son of Kigeri, Semugaza.[39]

It happened in this dramatic fashion that Nyiratunga and Gahindiro ascended the throne. As their enemies vanquished, they began to stabilize the kingdom.

In the aftermath of this incident, Umugabekazi and regent Nyiratunga named Nyiramuhanda to the *abiru*. For a woman to be privy to the secrets of this ritualist council was unheard of in the history of the Nyiginya kingdom. But the kingdom—including its ritual practitioners—was awed by her bravery and the extent of her sacrifice to ensure the throne of Gahindiro. In addition to becoming a *mwiru* (sing. of *abiru*), Nyiramuhanda was granted several corporations of workers, including a group of servants and millers'

[38] *Ibid*.
[39] *Ibid*. Another account has it that the Ibigina were burned alive for their crimes. Vansina collection, Sentabyo file, H, 4.

guild, as well as herds of cattle and land in Mutara, located in present-day northeastern Rwanda.[40]

Nyiramuhanda was the first and only woman ever to join the *abiru*. Her son Nyarwaya inherited her position, and her lineage, the Abadachumura ("without fault") was protected from capital punishment forever.[41] But this did not usher in a sea-change for the makeup of the *abiru*, at least not in the way such an event may suggest. Women still did not serve as *abiru*. However, it did signal that there was the possibility of royal favorites being named to the council. Nyiramuhanda was not simply a royal favorite—she had sacrificed her own son for the wellbeing of both the *mwami* and the kingdom. But her being named a *mwiru* demonstrated that the possibility existed, and subsequent monarchs—especially Gahindiro and his wife and future *umugabekazi*, Nyiramongi—would take advantage of this precedent for their own means.

Balancing Personal Ambition and Familial Obligation: Nyiratunga's Precarious Regency

Nyiratunga succeeded in having her son recognized as the legitimate heir of Sentabyo and being installed as *mwami* in his infancy. As his *umugabekazi*, she ruled as regent until he reached majority around the age of 20, meaning that her regency would be a long one. She had in Sentabyo's brother Barinyonza a valuable ally. But she was also a

[40] As with armies, which were basically corporations of fighters, abiru had corporations of servants, both to serve their own needs as well as the ritual needs of the kingdom. Vansina refers to these as "corporations of menials." Vansina, *Antecedents*, 55-56. Armies also had attached corporations of menials, which took care of their day-to-day needs such as food, water, shelter, etc.
[41] Kayijuka, *Lebensgeschichte*, 142.

descendant of the Makara's lineage of the Ega clan, which gave her a power base outside of her husband's royal family.

In the aftermath of the civil war, the Nyiginya dynasty had to ensure that such a conflict would not arise again. In order to understand how the monarchy reasserted its power, we must first examine how it emerged from the civil war. The truth of the matter is that, but for Nyiramuhanda's quick thinking and willing sacrifice, the War of the Ibigina might have ended with Sentabyo's brother Gatarabuhura or one of the other Ibigina taking possession of the Kalinga, the royal drum that signified ritual power and legitimacy to the *mwami*. Gahindiro's survival may have stabilized the kingdom, but only insofar as it was accompanied by the death of his many uncles. Though the oral sources portray Gahindiro as the rightful *mwami*, and his enthronement as the restoration of proper order to the kingdom, the reality is that if Gatarabuhura had succeeded and reigned over a time of fertility and peace, these same traditions might herald his legitimacy, and curse the lying Nyiratunga and her pretender son.

How these stories are told and remembered matters. While none of these narratives were written down until the colonial period, the way they were recorded from different sources reflects various perceptions of the figures involved. While some of the differences clearly spring from the historical context in which they were recorded, it is likely that other variations speak to perceptions from the time the stories were conceived.

For example, Kayijuka's account was recorded by Peter Schumacher in the early 1930s and published in 1938. This makes it the earliest recorded version of this story that is available. As such, it has been a valuable source for historians. The Nyiginya monarchy was profoundly weakened by the 1930s. Musinga, who became *mwami* in

1896 following the coup of Rucunshu, made many attempts to regain the power ceded over the decades of his rule first to the Germans and then to the Belgians. But by the 1930s, European power was too deeply entrenched. Musinga and his *umugabekazi* Kanjogera abdicated in 1931, and Musinga's son Rudahigwa was crowned *mwami*. He proved more open to working with the Belgians, and even converted to Catholicism in 1943.

The colonial period was a time of fundamental change and turmoil in Rwanda, particularly for the Tutsi nobility who had exercised so much power during the nineteenth century. Histories of the monarchical past, then, became even more important as they saw their power being slowly eroded, and new elites taking their places. As I argue in the Introduction, those who maintained their former elite status understood that they did not have the authority they once did. In this context, tales of the past became even more important, not simply for the royal court (which for all intents and purposes had ceased to exist as such by the time Musinga abdicated), but also for those Tutsi around the country who claimed royal or noble status. Kayijuka, the leading *abacurabwenge*, or court historian, understood his role in telling these stories to Schumacher within this framework. The story as he told it emphasizes the continuity of the Nyiginya dynasty and showcases the courage of the country's nobility. Nyiramuhanda, specifically, is heroic because she was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice of her child in order to preserve the kingdom. She and her family were rewarded with hereditary titles. The nobility, in this light, had persevered not just because of happenstance of birth but because of their truly noble actions.

When Vansina collected his *ibitéekerezo* in the late 1950s (?), it was another era, though only two decades removed chronologically from Schumacher's research. The nobility was in decline, and ideas of majority-rule gripped the country. The monarchy and its most ardent supporters had lost the favor of the Belgians, particularly after 1959, and there was growing anti-Tutsi sentiment throughout the country. The story of Nyiratunga and Nyiramuhanda contained in Vansina's collection reflects a need by the storyteller Jean Mugina—who was himself a well-known, professional performer—to bolster the reputation of the monarchy. In Mugina's version of Nyiramuhanda's rescue of Nyiratunga and Gahindiro as recorded by Vansina's project, Nyiratunga is presented as the reluctant wife to Sentabyo. Already a widow of Gihana, she rejected Sentabyo's initial suit. Sentabyo's father Ndabarasa sent his son back to Nyiratunga with the admonition that as an upstanding woman of the Ega clan, she should welcome Sentabyo into her bed. In Mugina's words, Nyiratunga "submitted" to Sentabyo, though she was really submitting to the will of her king.

That Mugina casts Nyiratunga in a slightly different light is important for understanding the myriad ways she could have been perceived in her own time. In both accounts, Nyiratunga was the widow of Gihana, a liberator of Rwanda. Because of this, many people, especially those in Nduga, which shared a border with Burundi, were likely to be sympathetic towards her. Kayijuka's account presents Nyiratunga with her infant Gahindiro as a figure of mystery, a frightened mother—but already a mother, nonetheless. Mugina's account highlights first and foremost her unmarried status. She is a woman whose place in the world is defined by many men but secured by none: the

widow of Gihana, the daughter of Rutabana, and the sought-after wife of Sentabyo.[42] Mugina also remarked on Nyiratunga's status as an Ega woman, who had a reputation for being headstrong and "difficult."[43]

Nyiratunga was a good woman who overcame the stubbornness of her Ega blood and submitted to Sentabyo, "believ[ing] the word of the king."[44] Ndabarasa died, and Sentabyo became *mwami*, leading to all-out war between him and the faction of his brothers and his father's favorite, Rukari of Muhabura. Four years later, Sentabyo died and his brothers, the *Ibigina*, celebrated what they believed was the imminent victory of Gatarabuhura. Yet their celebrations were dampened when they learned that Sentabyo had, indeed, left a son.

In Mugina's story, Nyiramuhanda was a nurse to Gahindiro, and when the *Ibigina* went to investigate claims of Gahindiro's existence, they spied her holding him in the yard of the house.[45] They called Nyiramuhanda and offered her anything her heart desired, if she would help murder the child. There is no mention of Nyiratunga's death being important, as there is in Kayijuka's account. Nyiramuhanda gave the *Ibigina* her false promise of aid and then went immediately to Nyiratunga to inform her of the plot. Instead of a servant, it is Nyiramuhanda herself who sleeps in Gahindiro's room with her own infant son. According to Mugina, she handed him over willingly to the *Ibigina*, who killed him in front of her.[46] This story highlights Nyiramuhanda's heroism by keeping her

[42] Vansina collection, Gahindiro file, T, 7.
[43] *Ibid*. This is likely a later embellishment.
[44] *Ibid*.
[45] I use the term "nurse" here loosely. Rwandan women, including elite women, breastfed their own children; in fact, it was considered almost "elegant." Only orphan children were nursed by foster mothers. Rose-Marie Mukarutabana, personal communication, 4 February 2014.
[46] Mugina's story features a rather gruesome description of cutting the child to pieces. Vansina collection, Gahindiro file, T, 7.

present during her son's murder. While Kayijuka's account makes her the selfless mother who loved her king more than her own son, Mugina's account is even more wrenching: for Nyiramuhanda to have survived, she had to steel herself against reacting while watching her own son's gruesome murder.

After the Ibigina left the compound, Nyiramuhanda went to get Nyiratunga, and brought her back to see the fate of her son Rubazangabo. According to Mugina, "Nyiratunga was taken with compassion and admiration for this courageous mother."[47] Nyiratunga took courage from Nyiramuhanda and had the drums beat to announce the health and safety of the king. When Sentabyo's brother Baryinyonza came to spirit the child away, Nyiratunga refused him and stood her ground, while the Ibigina and Rukari stormed the palace where she and Gahindiro sat, in a direct contradiction to Kayijuka's assertion that she wanted to run away. Baryinyonza killed Rukari, and the rest of the Ibigina were defeated.

Nyiratunga, here, is not portrayed as a particularly ambitious or calculating woman. From the beginning of the story, she was content to be Gihana's widow. She had no aspirations to be *umugabekazi* or to see her children ascend to the heights of power. Though Mugina includes a few references to the Ega clan, and particularly the stubbornness and "difficult character" of its women, this seems to be a more contemporary flourish, speaking to the well-earned reputation of Ega women as ruthless and ambitious by the late colonial period.[48] Nyiratunga is a rather unremarkable woman until she is forced by circumstances to be otherwise. Nyiratunga only reluctantly married

[47] *Ibid.*
[48] See here Erin Jessee and Sarah E. Watkins, "Good Kings, Bloody Tyrants, and Everything in Between: Representations of the Monarchy in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *History in Africa*, 41 (forthcoming).

Sentabyo. She hid when he died and did not immediately seek to have Gahindiro enthroned. Only because of the ruthlessness of the Ibigina and the selfless sacrifice of Nyiramuhanda did Nyiratunga find her own courage. When she stood up to the *Ibigina*, Mugina is careful to describe her sitting beside her son. Though he was still a minor, the focus is on his legitimacy, not her exercise of power.

Mugina's story provides important insight, particularly alongside Kayijuka, because they give different perspectives on Nyiratunga's rise to power. In Kayijuka, she is an almost mythical figure, steeped in the legend of her martyred first husband, grieving the loss of her second, but selflessly stepping forward to provide the kingdom with an heir. For Mugina, she is more relatable: a woman who is thrust into the spotlight, who almost chastises herself for her meekness in the wake of Nyiramuhanda's terrible sacrifice. These are both likely perceptions of Nyiratunga stemming from her own historical period. What they hold in common is a Nyiratunga whose power was not the result of ambition and posturing but rather her roles as widow, wife, and mother. In looking at the situation surrounding her ascension to the throne, it becomes more difficult to accept the simplistic and sympathetic story.

Nyiratunga and Gahindiro won against the *Ibigina*. But they won with help from quarters that would become increasingly important in the Nyiginya Kingdom, which had changed dramatically as a result of both the civil war and the recalibration of myth and legitimacy that had been enacted under Gahindiro's great-grandfather, Rujugira.

A key player in securing Gahindiro's succession was Barinyonza, Gahindiro's uncle and Sentabyo's brother. Baryinyonza's mother was an Ega woman from the

lineage of Makara, one of the most important Ega lineages.[49] There are two men named "Makara" in the genealogy of this lineage. The first, the so-called "ancient" Makara, is likely a semi-mythological figure.[50] The second, Makara "rwang'Abami," (literally, "king killer") a mere three generations removed from Barinyonza, is a much more likely candidate for a real person as opposed to conglomeration of people, or a community. This Makara is included in genealogies not only for Baryinyonza, who is ostensibly descended from Makara on his mother's side, since his father was the Nyiginya Mwami Ndabarasa whose own mother was Gesera, not Ega, but also for four of the five subsequent *abagabekazi* who would reign in Rwanda.[51] Makara's lineage, already influential by the turn of the nineteenth century, would become one of the most powerful in the country within the next hundred years.

Barinyonza's support, then, was not circumstantial. Nyiratunga was a woman of his lineage, and her ascendance could only strengthen the family's influence. But the country was still recovering from the civil war. In the parts of the country where the *Ibigina* held power, their patrons and supporters were likely suspicious of this new monarchical duo, and particularly of Gahindiro's legitimacy. If Nyiratunga behaved improperly, or exercised authority in an overly-aggressive way, it could upset the fragile stability. Further, while she was the one who held the office of both *umugabekazi*

[49] Jean Népomuscène Nkurikiyimfura, "La révision d'une chronologie: la cas du royaume du rwanda," in *Sources Orales De L'histoire De L'afrique*, edited by Claude Hélène Perrot, Gilbert Gonnin, Ferdinand Nahimana (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1989) 152 and 168. This also bears out in Delmas, *Génealogies*, 117; and Alexis Kagame, *Inganji Karinga II* (Kabgayi: [s.n.], 1947), (English and French translations by Rose-Marie Mukarutabana at http://www.dlblanc.com/Gakondo/en/Lists/Genealogy.php, last accessed 22 January 2014).

[50] Delmas labels him as "muziw'Abega," meaning "root of the Ega." This ancient Makara is also descended from the same mother as the mythological Mwami CyilimaRugwe, which not only speaks to his mythological status, but also to Ega aspirations to be more powerful than the other ibibanda (matridynastic clans), rivaling the power of the Nyiginya themselves. Delmas, *Génealogies*, 117.

[51] Her predecessor (Sentabyo's mother), Nyiratamba, was also of Makara's lineage of the Ega. Before her, Rujugira's adopted umugabekazi, Kirongoro, was also Ega, but from a different, but related, lineage. See Delmas, *Génealogies*, and Kagame, *Inganji Karinga*.

and regent, she would have been acutely aware that her power existed only because of the support of her family. While she could not show undue favoritism, she could not afford to alienate them. Unfortunately, we are given very little information in the oral literature to understand Nyiratunga's personality. She is portrayed, consistently, as a loving mother and obedient wife and widow. Unlike her successors, there do not seem to be any stories highlighting her ruthlessness or cunning. Rather, she is presented as a capable regent who held the kingdom in trust for her son, adding to its peace and prosperity.

But the silences here raise important questions of their own, and invite a certain level of speculation.[52] Nyiratunga assumed the regency after a destructive civil war. Gahindiro's reign is almost uniformly described as an era of peace and prosperity. Transition periods following civil conflict are usually marked by difficulties, particularly on the part of those who lost. The Ibigina did not survive; they were either killed or chased into exile where they died, depending on which version of the story one hears. But what happened to their supporters? It is not likely that entire systems of patronage were wiped out after the Ibigina's failed attempt on Gahindiro's life. We must assume, then, that Nyiratunga did more than care for her son as regent. In addition to her responsibilities as *umugabekazi*, she had to act as steward for her son's interests, including the armies, herds, and corporations of workers and servants he inherited. In order to understand the kind of role she assumed, it is useful to consider the history of joint-rulership in the Nyiginya monarchy and the expectations of this kind of stewardship.

[52] On silences and their related questions and implications, see David William Cohen, *The Combing of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Joint-Rulership and Mother-Regents in the Nyiginya Kingdom and World History

In the history of the Nyiginya monarchy, there are three types of joint-rulership. The first, practiced mostly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and then revived by Mwami Rwabugiri at the end of the nineteenth century, involved a *mwami* naming one of his sons as his co-ruler, with the implication that this son would be his heir.[53] That Ndabarasa did not name one of his sons as co-ruler, as had previously been the tradition, could help explain why his death brought such a destructive civil war. The second type of joint-rulership was less common, and involved a favorite of the *mwami* holding immense power and wealth.[54] The third was, of course, the joint-rulership between a *mwami* and his *umugabekazi*.

Alison Des Forges argues that, while the third type of joint-rulership existed well before the nineteenth century, it was a series of unique circumstances that led to its becoming a tool of political instability, rather than its intended purpose of alleviating conflict within the kingdom.[55] She contends that because so many consecutive *abagabekazi* ruled as regents, and did so efficiently, it helped to raise the profile of this role. And since the majority of these women were descended from the same lineage, it created a situation in which, for the first time, there was a clear and present danger to Nyiginya supremacy in the form of the Abakagara line of the Ega clan. Until Gahindiro's birth, there had only been one child ruler in the history of the kingdom. In contrast, every *mwami* of the nineteenth century began his rule as a child, with a powerful regent *umugabekazi*. The circumstances under which these reigns began made possible political

[53] I hasten to note that this was only the implication, since an heir was only official when a dying mwami whispered the name of his heir to the abiru on his deathbed.
[54] This is covered in more detail below in chapter two, regarding the institution of the *umutoni*.
[55] Alison Liebhafsky Des Forges, "Two Thunders Cannot Share One Cloud: Joint Rulership in Nineteenth Century Rwanda," at the African Studies Association 19th annual meeting (Boston, 1976).

innovations on the part of the *abagabekazi* that simply could not have existed in previous times. Further, the civil war and infighting between powerful families and the royal clan had taken its toll. The monarchy emerged from this period significantly constrained by its obligations to its supporters. And the biggest supporter of the monarchy after 1801 was Makara's lineage of the Ega clan. For this reason, a recalibration of the history of the Nyiginya dynasty is in order. Once we understand the opportunities presented by joint-rulership in the context of what Vansina calls "the triumph of the great families," we must reconsider how we read the historical narratives and other oral traditions.[56] Though the focus of many of these stories remains on elite men and their activities, we must examine them with an awareness of where power lay during this period, and in the knowledge of who was really calling the shots.

Mother-regents could be preferable to other types of regencies for a few reasons. First and most obviously, the *umugabekazi* already possessed power in her own right. She controlled armies and herds, as well as corporation of workers, and she likely had done so for several years by the time she ascended the throne. She was therefore familiar with the mechanisms of rule, since she had assembled her own advisors and clients. This previous experience provided an easy transition to power. Secondly, mother-regents—at least in the cases in which the regent was the biological mother of the son—were often assumed to have the child's best interests in mind, if not a wholly identical agenda. The regency model of joint-rulership is a tricky one for historians to consider. Regent-mothers have existed in many cultures and time-periods. The way these women wielded power has varied significantly. But all of them have held in common a reliance on the assumption of legitimacy and fidelity for success. Looking at historical examples from other cultural

[56] Vansina, *Antecedents*, 140.

contexts illuminates the practice of mother-regency in relation to this Nygyinya case study, because it illustrates how the identity of motherhood created simultaneously a set of culturally benign, if not benevolent assumptions about how women would wield power, and the realization that women in power could be just as conniving, ruthless, and ambitious as their husbands and sons.

In world history, one of the most famous examples of mother-regency is the Empress Wu of the Chinese Tang Dynasty (c. 625-705). Wu Zhou became the consort of Emperor Taizong during the seventh century when she was still quite young. After Taizong's death, she became consort to his son, the Emperor Gaozong, and eventually they married. This alone would have been unusual, since according to Confucian tradition, there is no difference between one's biological son and one's stepson, meaning that this marriage would have been considered incestuous. Gaozong was ill through most of his reign, and suffered a debilitating stroke in 660. Instead of yielding power to an heir, Wu ruled until her death in 705. She oversaw major territorial expansion of the Tang Dynasty, both in the west to Central Asia, and in the east to the Korean Peninsula. She also favored the elevation of Taoism and Buddhism, legitimizing more religious diversity within the empire. But most importantly, she assumed the mantle and accoutrements of imperial rule. Unlike other female rulers in Chinese history, she did not simply rule through her husband or son; rather, she exercised power in her own name, going so far as to wear the yellow robe of the emperor, claiming the color that could only be worn by the emperor himself. [57]

[57] Nigel Cawthorne, *Daughter of Heaven: The True Story of the Only Woman to Become Emperor of China* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007); Jonathan Clements, *Wu: The Chinese Empress Who Schemed, Seduced and*

Wu's example demonstrates the potential for women's advancement under a system of joint-rulership. As both a mother and wife to Gaozong, it was assumed that she would have his best interests at heart. Though she eventually took power for herself, it was only possible because of her relationship to Gaozong. But she also ensured that she was the only voice he heard. Even though his illness prior to his stroke, Wu convinced Gaozong to eliminate other wives and consorts she found threatening to her influence over him. By the time of his stroke, she had become his closest advisor. She was further emboldened by elite women's isolation within the palace during this period. She could easily make it seem, for a time, that her orders were actually those of Gaozong. By using this period to shore up her own support, she helped ensure that her edicts would go unchallenged by the time she actually began exercising power in her own name. And because China prospered under her rule, she went more or less unchallenged once she assumed full imperial authority. This case is not dissimilar to Umugabekazi Nyiratunga's regency of her son, Mwami Gahindiro. As a child, Gahindiro was more able to be manipulated by his mother, who could ensure that those around him supported her own positions. Once he began to advocate for policies similar to hers, no one would object, since it appeared that the wills of both *mwami* and *umugabekazi* were in alliance. But this acceptance of Nyiratunga's regency was also contingent upon a level of peace and prosperity within the kingdom.

The economic system of the Nyiginya kingdom was based largely on cooperation between pastoralists and agriculturalists. Because cattle required a significant investment of land, herding became the purview of the elites. Trade between herders and

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Murdered Her Way to Become a Living God (Stroud: Sutton, 2007); and N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008).

agriculturalists usually took the form of clientship, in which a cow was given in usufruct in exchange for a regular supply of produce or other crops, as well as some form of political allegiance. During Mwami Gahindiro's reign, the ranks of the elites grew, meaning that cattle wealth was rather widely distributed. Umugabekazi Nyiratunga, and Gahindiro after her, were generous with their wealth, which grew significantly after the defeat of the Ibigina, when their cattle and land was taken by the royal faction. The result of this windfall for Nyiratunga and Gahindiro was that they had more wealth to distribute to those who had been faithful to them. They seem to have done so judiciously, enriching the growing ranks of the elites, and increasing social mobility for their clients. Again, it appears that Nyiratunga was a wise mother-regent, content to exercise a more subtle form of power. But this has certainly not always been the case with female rulers.

A second notable example is Margaret d'Anjou (1430-1482). Margaret was born to French nobility and then married to Henry VI of England. Henry was struck with bouts of some kind of mental illness that rendered him unable to fulfill his duties, and Margaret stepped up as regent. Henry was a king of the house of Lancaster, but when his illness threatened the security of the realm, his rule was challenged by the house of York, leading to the Wars of the Roses. Margaret led the Lancastrian faction in the name of not only her husband but also of their son Edward of Westminster. Henry was removed from the throne for a few years while Edward was still a child, and Margaret became the regent, winning important battles against the Duke of York and solidifying the House of Lancaster's relationship with the French royal family, to whom she was related. Henry recovered in 1470 and reclaimed his throne, but the disastrous battle of Tewkesbury in 1471 resulted in Edward's death, and Henry not long after. Without a royal husband or

son upon which to base her regency, Margaret was left with no recognized avenue to power. She was exiled to France where she lived as a pauper until her death in 1482.[58]

Margaret represents another archetype of the mother-regent. Within a patriarchal monarchy such as England's, her only claim to power lay in being either a wife or a mother. When Henry's illness required him to vacate the throne, Margaret's position was in jeopardy but for her infant son Edward. But because Edward was the heir and Margaret held an advantageous position vis-à-vis the French monarchy, which the House of Lancaster needed as an ally, she succeeded in claiming the regency without significant interference. Henry's return complicated these factors. Although Margaret had proven herself a capable regent, she could never be the actual ruler of England. Henry's and Edward's deaths removed all possibilities for Margaret's return to power.

Margaret d'Anjou's example highlights the precariousness of the regent-mother. Because regencies in most monarchies were not officially sanctioned positions, they were usually *ad hoc* arrangements. This meant that the rules governing them were also unclear and subject to change based on the whims of politics. Combined with the complicated positions that elite women held within patriarchal monarchies, the political fortunes of these women could change overnight. Margaret was a queen-regent one day, and virtually destitute the next. Her predicament suggests the difficulty that elite women faced in navigating the society into which they were born. If a woman's worth relied on her status as a wife or mother, then the loss of either husband or son – or in Margaret's case, both of them – could be calamitous.

[58] Jacob Abbott, *Margaret of Anjou*, (New York: Harper, 1902); and, Helen E. Maurer, *Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in Late Medieval England* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2003).

A final historical example of the mother-regent position is the Byzantine Empress Irene of Athens (c. 752-803), who served as empress consort, empress dowager, and empress regnant throughout her exceptional career. Irene married Emperor Leo IV in 768. It is interesting to note that while historians highlight that she was from a rather elite family, this does not seem to be a particularly political match. Some speculate that Leo might have chosen her from a "bride show," where eligible and appropriate women were paraded before the emperor so that he could choose one to marry.[59] Irene gave birth to a son who would become Emperor Constantine VI. Not long after the birth of her son, Irene and her husband came into an irrevocable conflict over her possession of icons, religious artwork that Leo, an iconoclast, had banned within the empire. Though he did not set her aside, they ceased having any sort of marital relations. Following Leo's death in 780, Irene became the Empress Dowager-Regnant, since Constantine was still a child. Leo's half-brother presented a challenge to her regency and Constantine's inheritance, but she quickly neutralized the treat by naming the conspirators to the priesthood, which in Byzantium made them ineligible to rule. She also took steps to heal the schism between the Eastern and Western churches, first by appointing an ally as patriarch. Tarasios called two ecumenical councils; the later one, held in 787 and known as the Second Council of Nicaea, restored the veneration of icons to the Eastern Church, and realigned it more closely with its Western counterpart.

Where Irene differs from other mother-regents, but finds herself in excellent company with the Ega *abagabekazi* of the nineteenth-century Nyiginya kingdom, is that she showed willingness to relinquish power to her son, once the latter had come of age.

[59] Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium, AD 527-1204* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999).

As Constantine grew older and established his own political allies, he attempted to assert his independence. Irene not only thwarted him at nearly every turn but changed the oath of fidelity in the empire to her alone. In 790, Constantine rallied the soldiers to his cause, and proclaimed himself the sole ruler. Though he and Irene continued to play nice in public, she took steps to undermine him by having herself confirmed as Empress in 792. Five years later, weary of Constantine's interference, she organized her own conspiracy. Constantine attempted to flee but was caught by Irene's forces, who put out his eyes. He died shortly after. Irene's reign was deemed illegitimate by the new Pope, Leo III, who crowned Charlemagne at the Holy Roman Emperor in 800, giving him authority over the entirety of the Christian world. Irene, ever the cunning political mind, attempted to negotiate a marriage to Charlemagne but was unsuccessful. She was ousted in 802 by the patriarchs, and sent to Lesbos, where she died the following year.[60]

Irene, more than any other regent in world history, presents a significant comparison to the *abagabekazi* of the Nyiginya kingdom. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the regents who followed Nyiratunga grew bolder in their acquisition and exercise of power, perhaps even owing to her own example. They chafed at having to yield power to their sons after exercising it alone for so long. Though each continued to hold the position of *umugabekazi*, they did not seem to relish sharing power within a co-equal model of joint-rulership after they had sole authority. The questions raised by their actions are the most important moving forward, and would present the challenge that would ultimately cause the downfall of the monarchy in the mid-twentieth century.

[60] Dominique Barbe, *Irène De Byzance: La Femme Empereur* (Paris: Perrin, 1990); also, Judith Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence : Women and Empire in Byzantium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

Crucial here is the timing of this boldness on the part of the *abagabekazi*. Why, all of a sudden, was there such a sustained contagion of women willing to part with tradition and exercise power over that of their sons? The answer, I believe, is twofold. First, the increased power of the "great families" emboldened them. While previous *abagabekazi* understood that the Nyiginya held ultimate authority in the kingdom, and that their own families could be in peril if they crossed them, particularly after the example of women such as Nyamarembo, *umugabekazi* to Mazimpaka, the new reality following the War of the Ibigina was that the Nyiginya were more beholden to these families, and particularly to the Ega.[61] The *bami* (pl. of *mwami*) had to step lightly not only around the *abagabekazi* but also their families. Since the *abagabekazi* themselves exercised a significant amount of power, including constituting armies and herds, they were not without allies who were more loyal to them than to the *mwami*, particularly if the latter was only a child.

Second, as I have emphasized above, the mother-regent model of joint-rulership was a relatively recent innovation in the kingdom. No *umugabekazi* save Cyirima Rugwe's had been afforded the opportunity to exercise sole power in the kingdom. It is not unreasonable to think that women who held the position, and were successful, might be reluctant to give up this power, especially to a young son with little in the way of experience. Nyiratunga was quite young when she became the regent and *umugabekazi*. Most likely, she was only about 23 years old when she gave birth to Gahindiro and about

[61] For more on the Nyamarembo's plot, and her execution by Mazimpaka, see Vansina's collection, Mazimpaka file, T, 2; also, Kayijuka, 135; and, Kagame, *Abrégé T.1*, 126. Nyamarembo was of a Kono lineage, and no other Kono woman would hold the position of umugabekaz for more than a century, until the reign of Murorunkwere (1863-1876). Kono fortunes, like everyone else's, seemed to fall in favor of the Abakagara lineage of the Ega.

27 when Sentabyo died. Thus, she lived into the reign of her grandson Rwogera.[62] This means that the original rationale behind the *umugabekazi* as a position to basically placate the *ibibanda* (matridynastic lineages) while giving them only a small amount of actual power, ceased to function beginning with Nyiratunga.

The event that threw such a wrench into the works was the very young and unexpected death of Sentabyo. Much ink has been spilled about the distinction between mythological and historical events in the Rwandan past. It is true that it is virtually impossible to verify anything as historical before the mid-nineteenth century, putting Sentabyo's reign outside of this period by a significant margin. However, given the nature of the oral historiography, and the profound efforts undertaken by *bami* such as Rujugira to fit the history to suit his own ends (and bolster his own legitimacy), Sentabyo's short, unremarkable reign should give us pause.

The cyclical nature of kingly names was supposed to indicate the nature of these reigns. Included in these assumptions is that earlier reigns in a cycle should be longer, and the latter ones shorter. A Mibambwe *mwami* should have had an average-length reign, at least a couple of decades. This may explain the effort on the part of some of the traditions – which survived into the late 1950s – to cast Sentabyo's short reign as part of a pact made between Ndabarasa and Sentabyo, in which the former makes the latter promise to reign for only four years before ushering in his own son. In this tradition, Gahindiro was born prior to the death of Ndabarasa.[63] The only possible usefulness for telling the story in this way is to relieve any lingering doubts about the legitimacy of Gahindiro. Ndabarasa, whose reign is celebrated as one of the greatest, gave his blessing

[62] These are Vansina's estimates, though they seem reasonable. See Vansina, *Antecedents*, 212-13.
[63] Vansina collection, T, 11.

to the reign of his grandson, even to the point of eclipsing his own son and heir. With this kind of confirmation, the people could relax, content in the knowledge that Gahindiro was the true sovereign, and had the blessing of both the ancestors and the heavens. Such a story would have been convenient for Nyiratunga as well. With her son given the mantle of legitimacy (which was increased, of course, by his enthronement by the Tsobe ritualists and the conferral of the Kalinga drum), she could be reasonably assured that her own regency would not be challenged. This was also bolstered by her own family's power, and the prestige she brought to the office by way of her famous ancestors: both Makaras, as well as Kirongoro, Rujugira's *umugabekazi*, whose accession paved the way to stability after Mazimpaka's paranoid reign, and Rwaka's disastrous one. The second, and most important, question raised by the nineteenth-century *abagabekazi* is what the effects were upon the institution of the monarchy itself. Already, by the time Nyiratunga assumed power in 1801, the monarchy had undergone some profound changes. It had been weakened by the "great families." It had been compromised by internecine struggle between brothers. But as yet, it retained its mystique and its ritual legitimacy.

Kingship in the Nyiginya Kingdom was two-fold: on the one hand, it was the leading administrative position in the country. The *mwami* appointed counselors and chiefs and delegated to them the responsibilities of running the country. Together, they helped him ensure peace and stability, to expand the borders of the country, and to settle disputes judiciously. But this was not the only function of kingship. Perhaps more importantly, the *mwami* was a vessel of *imana*, the sacred force of the heavens and the ancestors. By the time Gahindiro ascended the throne, the mythology surrounding kinship held that when a man became *mwami*, he left behind what he was before. He was no longer just a man, but a sacred conduit. Although the *mwami* remained mortal, he was

also different from any other mortal man.[64] The poem "*Umwamisiumuntu*" or "The Mwami is not a Person," which dates from this period, is an excellent reference. It describes how, prior to his enthronement, the *mwami* is a noble like any other. But when he is invested with the power of the office, he becomes something else, and is moved to do so by supernatural power.[65]

As such, the *mwami* was not free. One of the most egregious errors of the colonial literature produced by European scholars was the attribution of absolute power to the *mwami*.[66] It is really only through David Newbury's careful readings of the text of kingly rituals recorded by André Coupez, Thomas Kamanzi, and Marcel d'Hertefelt that we begin to understand how kingship was quite constrained and how the *mwami* was subject to tremendous pressure to live up to his name, as well as ensure the fertility and prosperity of his people and their cattle.[67] Being *mwami*, then, was about more than simply being a capable administrator. One had to maintain the mantle of ritual legitimacy. This was something that only the *mwami* could do; even before he came of age, the *mwami* was expected to perform these rituals after enthronement. The *umugabekazi* regent, for all her authority, could not replace the *mwami* in these matters. As it was, she had ritual prescriptions of her own to which she must adhere. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, this was the essence of kingship.

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[64] Sipiriyani Rugamba, *La Poésie Face a l'histoire cas de la poésie dynastique rwandaise* (Kabgayi, Rwanda: I.N.R.S, 1987). For more from Gahindiro's reign, see Alexis Kagame and Pierre Charles, *La Poésie Dynastique*, 172-77.

[65] Vansina, *Antecedents*, 141.

[66] For example, see R. Bourgeois, *Banyarwanda Et Barundi T.1* (Bruxelles: Académie Royale des Sciences Coloniales, 1957); Delmas, *Génealogies*, 1961; Louis de Lacger, *Ruanda* (Kabgayi, Rwanda, 1961); and, G. Pagès, *Au Ruanda sur les bords du Lac Kivu (Congo Belge): Un royaume hamite au centre de l'Afrique* (Bruxelles: G. van Campenhout, 1933).

[67] It is relatively easy to compare ritual kingship in Rwanda to the ancient Chinese understanding of the emperor as serving under the Mandate of Heaven, including that an unjust ruler might lose this legitimacy, and expose himself to the possibility of being overthrown.

But did this change over the course of the century? I contend that it did, and Nyiratunga's actions helped begin this alteration. She initiated a process her successors would use to much greater effect: she politicized the *abiru*. By naming Nyiramuhanda, the savior of the nation and hero of the realm, to the *abiru*, Nyiratunga introduced politicking into what had heretofore been a corporation of ritual practitioners whose purpose stood apart from politics. Though sometimes *bami* had sought counsel from various *abiru*, the institution itself was not political, but rather spiritual. Nyiramuhanda's appointment changed that. Though Nyiratunga herself did not use this to her advantage, at least as far as we can tell, the potential of her actions was not lost on those who came after her. Her own son Gahindiro expanded the *abiru* and filled the new positions with partisans loyal to him. The politicization of the *abiru* made it into just another council, and made it possible for subsequent *abagabekazi* to simply ignore their orders.

The other most obvious exercise of power by Nyiratunga was her arrangement of Gahindiro's marriages. It is in this that Nyiratunga's careful brilliance shows most prominently. She was not reckless enough to compromise her own position by trying to seize more power than was hers. When Gahindiro came of age, she graciously shrank back into her proper *umugabekazi* position, even going so far as to seclude herself within her house, administrating her herds and armies from there. For this, and her judicious exercise of her authority, she was praised at court well into the reign of her grandson. But her influence lived on. Gahindiro married a few women from her Abakagara lineage, including the infamous Nyiramongi, who would become *umugabekazi* and regent after the death of Gahindiro. Though Nyiratunga's influence here is downplayed by the oral traditions, it seems that this was likely done in order to set up Nyiramongi's tumultuous

and often violent reign as an anomaly, rather than to tie her to the noble and wise Nyiratunga.

Conclusion

Nyiratunga assumed power under the shadow of civil war, national instability, and illegitimacy. Though the oral traditions are short on details of her reign, it is clear that she was a shrewd politician, and that she expertly balanced the needs of the kingdom and monarchy with the ambitions of her own family. Her reputation for nobility, modesty, and judiciousness allowed her to navigate successfully a complex political moment, and shore up support for her young son, as well as for her own regency. Her reign signaled the changes that were to come in the kingdom, as well as the end of the previous era. She came to prominence during a time of crisis for the Nyiginya monarchy. Though previous *bami* had solidified the legitimacy of the royal lineage through a recalibration of the oral traditions and rituals under Rujugira, and through newly-forged alliances with important lineage from the *ibibanda* (matridynastic clans), the succession dispute following the death of Ndabarasa had shattered this piece. Although the faction to which Nyiratunga was loyal emerged victorious, Sentabyo's death rendered it a hollow victory.

Using her capital as the widow of a martyred "liberator," as well as the sympathy from her status as the mother to a young child almost murdered by his jealous uncles, Nyiratunga re-forged the alliances of Rujugira, solidifying her Abakagara lineage's influence as the most important. She was aided in this cause by Nyiramuhanda, whose unimaginable sacrifice of her own young son raised her to a status beyond reproach. By installing Nyiramuhanda as one of the *abiru*—the only woman to ever hold the post—

Nyiratunga demonstrated that nobility was not conferred simply by right of birth but by nobility of spirit. This emphasized that individual actions could reap rewards for those individuals, even women, and not just for their families.

Nyiratunga's decision to honor Nyiramuhanda would have repercussions far beyond her reign. By politicizing the council of ritual practitioners at court, she began a process of undermining the objective ritual legitimacy of the kingship. Her successors would seize upon this, and use the *abiru* and other component of ritual legitimacy to their own ends. Further, her elevation of her lineage to this position of prominence would have profound repercussions through the follow century and a half. Perhaps most importantly, though, was Nyiratunga's demonstration of the potential for the mother-regent model of joint-rulership. Though *abagabekazi* had always had some form of power, it was the confluence of both her long regency, and her family's centrality to the continued prosperity of the kingdom that made for such a potent model. Subsequent *abagabekazi* would follow this example; for those with strong familial backing and strong political acumen, it would prove a potent combination. For those lacking one or the other, however, it would be a recipe for disaster.

Chapter 2

The Last Umutoni and the Triumph of the Wife: Sex, Envy, and Murder at the Nyiginya Court, 1820-1847

Before a woman could become *umugabekazi* (queen mother), she had to first become *umwamikazi*, or queen. Queenship in Rwanda was determined not only by noble status, but by ritual prescriptions as well. The essence of queenship, however, lay in the reality of legitimate sexual, and therefore reproductive, access to the *mwami* (king). Significant scholarship, both historical and contemporary, has contributed to our understanding of what sociologist Catherine Hakim calls "erotic capital" as a mechanism of women's influence even within the most patriarchal societies.[1] Hakim defines erotic capital as a set of qualities, including beauty, fertility, sexual competency, social attractiveness, and vivaciousness, which women in particular can use to their advantage in terms of career advancement. In a non-capitalist context, the theory is less focused on career advancement *per se*, and more as a way of quantifying women's ability to navigate the patriarchal structures of monarchy. For elite women in monarchical Rwanda, sexual access to power was one of the few ways that they could endeavor to gain political influence. In this way, the Rwandan monarchy was not dissimilar to monarchical systems around the world.[2] But sexual access to the *mwami*, and therefore to power, was not limited to only queens, nor even exclusively to women. Less prominent within the literature on sex and power, particularly within an African context, are studies which examine the ways in which other types of royal intimates could gain legitimate power, particularly if these intimates were same-sex partners. In this chapter, I explore the

[1] The term "erotic capital" is Catherine Hakim's. Catherine Hakim, *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom*,(New York: Basic Books, 2011).
[2] Eleanor Herman, Sex *with Kings: 500 Years of Adultery, Power, Rivalry, and Revenge* (New York: Morrow, 2004).

network of sexual power at the royal court and how it was used with particular proficiency during the reign of Mwami Yuhi III Gahindiro (r. 1820-1845). During his reign, his queen Nyiramongi and his foremost advisor Rugaju became embroiled in a conflict in which the importance of marriage and reproduction, which institutionalized and stabilized a particular type of intimate relationship, became abundantly clear, and from which only Nyiramongi would emerge with her life.

Nyiramongi was a woman of the Ega clan. She married Gahindiro sometime before he became *mwami* (king) in 1820. By all accounts, Gahindiro was quite taken with her, though whether this was love or a desire to gain the support of her family is a matter of some debate within the oral literature and among historians. What is apparent is that she was a figure who commanded great respect and fear at court, including from her husband's foremost advisor, Rugaju.

Rugaju was the son of Mutimbo, whose family had migrated to Nduga (contemporary south-central Rwanda) from Ndorwa (contemporary northeast Rwanda and southeast Uganda). They were a family of modest herders who had gained favor at the royal court, and Rugaju and Gahindiro became friends as children, during their *intore* (warrior) training. As Gahindiro rose to prominence, Rugaju rose with him, becoming Gahindiro's most trusted advisor when he became *mwami*. Gahindiro entrusted Rugaju with the most important political aspects of running the kingdom, to the extent that many oral traditions refer to Rugaju's role as that of a regent. Rugaju was Gahindiro's *umutoni*, in a tradition dating back to the court of Mwami Kigeli III Ndabarasa (r. c. 1786-c.1796), and his great favorite Rukari of Muhabura. In both of these cases, we are to understand that the *umutoni* was not simply an advisor, but the closest of companions.

Umutoni (pl. *abatoni*) is often translated from Kinyarwanda as "best friend," but this does not adequately express the complexity of the term. An *umutoni* is the closest of friends, one that is prized and protected above all others. The *umutoni* relationship implies a deep commitment to one another's wellbeing, and to one's physical and spiritual sustenance. An *umutoni* is one for which you would give your life and all of your riches. While in Rwanda today the term is mostly used to describe a particular type of platonic relationship, historically it carried the implication of an intimate relationship. This seems to be the case when considering the relationship between Gahindiro and Rugaju. Jan Vansina writes that "homosexuality was admitted at court and quite common in military circles."[3] But he goes on to argue that this did not necessarily signal greater political influence for the kings' lovers. The reality, it seems, is more complicated.

Vansina is correct to the extent that sex did not always equal power in the Nyiginya court. However, sex provided access to power, and represented a highly viable avenue to gaining influence within the monarchical system. This situation was not unique to Rwanda, and is in fact perhaps one of the more mundane realities of monarchical or imperial power (to the extent that sex can be thought of as mundane). Intimacy premised on desire and affection has produced powerful political figures in a variety of contexts. The French monarchy is widely known for its intrigues regarding nobility and royalty and their lovers.[4] In fact, the *maîtresse en titre* of Louis XIV's court is not unlike the *umutoni* of Ndabarasa or Gahindiro. Early modern France is rife with cases of the potential power of royal mistresses, and they illustrate the importance of a royal advisor with whom the

[3] Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 108.
[4] Katherine Crawford, *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

monarch was also intimately involved. Francis I's (r. 1515-1547) male advisors fell increasingly out of favor when Francis' mistress, the Duchesse d'Etampes, extended her influence over Francis and took charge of several policy areas.[5] Further, there is the case of the famous Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV's *maîtresse en tître*. Pompadour not only made a name for herself because of the longevity of her reign and her role in the dismissal from court of all Louis's other favorites, but also because of the political power she wielded.[6] Thomas Kaiser argues that her power emanated not only from the policies she influenced and created, but also from the perception that she controlled the voracious sexual appetites of Louis. In the context of the increasingly centralized French state in which the royal court was the center of both political and cultural power, the rise of Pompadour is key to understanding the formation of the French state in the eighteenth century. The nineteenth century was a time of increased centralization in Rwanda, largely due to Rugaju's innovations during Gahindiro's reign. Similar to Pompadour, there was the broad public perception that Rugaju exercised control over Gahindiro because Rugaju possessed the *mwami*'s deep love and affection.

In her study of the court of Roman Emperor Claudius, Barbara Levick theorizes the palace as a series of concentric circles of power, with the bedroom as the locus.[7] The more intimate the setting, the more power those admitted potentially had over the emperor, and therefore the empire. Because even noble-born Roman women had so few means of exercising legitimate power, sexuality presented a potent opportunity to better their own lot, and perhaps that of their children, as Levick illustrates through the story of

[5] David Potter, "Politics and Faction at the Court of Francis I: the Duchesse d'Etampes, Montmorency and the Dauphin Henri," *French History* (2007): 127-46.
[6] Thomas E. Kaiser, "Madame de Pompadour and the Theaters of Power," *French Historical Studies* 19, n. 4 (Fall 1996): 1025-1044.
[7] Barbara Levick, *Claudius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

Messalina, the third wife of the Emperor Claudius. Yet sex and death often seem intertwined in these webs of intrigue, as we also see not only in the case of Messalina, who was executed after conspiring with one of her many lovers to murder her husband, but in the lives of both Rugaju and Nyiramongi. Because sex as a means of acquiring and exercising power within monarchical settings existed in a political grey area—neither strictly legitimate nor illegitimate—there were no specific rules regarding its use. Rugaju rose to heretofore unknown heights of power for someone of his status while Gahindiro was alive, but his fall after Gahindiro's death was swift and absolute, owing largely to the fact that Rugaju had no ritual role at court. Nyiramongi's eventual murder at the hands of her brother, dealt with in more detail in Chapter 3, represented a crisis in the rise of royal feminine power in Rwanda.

Abatoni and *abwamikazi* (queens) ostensibly shared this position of sexual access to power, though a queen's situation was further complicated by the need to bear children—most importantly, sons and potential heirs—for the *mwami*. Producing sons had added significance for Rwandan queens, because if one's son was chosen as heir, then the queen would become *umugabekazi* (chief commandress) when he ascended the throne. As a position of equal power to that of the *mwami*, becoming *umugabekazi* was an ambition of many wives, or at least of their families. Further, as in the case of Nyiramongi, reproduction was a pathway to continued relevance and access to political influence. Sexual access to the *mwami* would only continue so long as her husband was alive; for her career to continue, that power would have to morph as she aged and her circumstances changed.

The fact of this atmosphere of sexual competition as a potential avenue to power created a fascinating dynamic at the royal court. This dynamic became particularly potent

during and immediately after the reign of Gahindiro because of the growing power of the *umugabekazi*, for example the regency of Nyiratunga, as discussed in chapter one. Nyiramongi took full advantage of this as queen, and capitalized on her family's influence to secure succession for her son and herself. However, Gahindiro ceded almost all but his ritual role as *mwami* to Rugaju, whose innovations would have lasting effects on wealth, power, and identity in Rwanda. Rugaju also seems to have often been at odds with Nyiramongi; he may have even been behind Gahindiro's choice to name Rwogera as his heir, but his son Nkusi as the head of the Nyiginya clan. This decision meant that while Nyiramongi's son (Rwogera) would become *mwami*, and therefore she would become *umugabekazi*, her son would not inherit the leadership of the royal clan, putting a variety of powers outside of his, and therefore Nyiramongi's, control.[8] After Gahindiro's death, it did not take long for the feud between Nyiramongi and Rugaju to come out into the open, and this rivalry culminated in Nyiramongi's accusing Rugaju of poisoning Gahindiro, and Rugaju's eventual downfall as a traitor.

The *Umutoni* and Elite Male Sexuality

The *umutoni*, which Rwandan historian Alexis Kagame translated as "*grand favori*," was a fixture of elite social norms in the interlacustrine region. Colonial-era studies indicate that favorites were common in both Rwanda and Burundi, and that these

[8] Alexis Kagame, *Les organisations socio-familiales de l'ancien Rwanda* (Brussels: Academie royale des sciences coloniales, 1954). Further, it was widely known that Nyiramongi and Nkusi did not get along, and that he worked to undermine her authority. He was allied to Nyiramongi's son, and his half-brother, Rwogera. For all her efforts to legitimize her position through her son, she and Rwogera shared real animosity, which was at times murderous.

were usually men chosen from the ranks of noblemen's clients.[9] Not all *abatoni* were lovers; there does not, for example, seem to be any indication that Rwabugiri's *umutoni*, Nzigaye, was anything more than a close advisor. But there is also little to no evidence that Rwabugiri had any male lovers at all. Gahindiro, on the other hand, appears to have taken a great number of lovers of both sexes.[10] An understanding of the *umutoni* as he existed at court, particularly if he was the *mwami*'s lover as well as his advisor, is key to a broader understanding of how political power was gained, lost, and practiced in elite circles.

Sexual norms at the Rwandan court, as in most historical contexts, did not reflect larger norms of sexual behavior. While there is virtually no source that speaks to non-elite sexualities in the interlacustrine region in this time period, the interpretation of the acceptance and normalization of same-sex behavior on the part of men by local historians is that it was all part of the larger court ethos of indulgence and the lives of leisure led by elites, and the assumption that men would seek sexual outlets regardless of the availability of female partners.[11] The socialization toward same-sex behavior started young, and boys from noble or royal lineages often had their first same-sex experiences during their *intore* training, from around the age of 10.[12] The education of an *intore* warrior was not simply about learning how to fight; it was indoctrination into the lifestyle

[9] Ethel M. Albert, "Socio-Political Organization and Receptivity to Change: Some Differences between Ruanda and Urundi," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (1960): 46-74.
[10] Kayijuka. "Lebensgeschichte Des Grossfürsten Kayijuka Und Seiner Ahnen Seit Sultan Yuhi Mazimpaka, König Von Ruanda. Von Ihm Selbst Erzählt. Translated by Dr. Peter Schumacher, M.A." *Mitteilungen der Ausland-Hochschule an der Universität Berlin 41 (Afrikanischen Studien)* (1938): 103-61; and Vansina, *Antecedents*, 141.
[11] Interviews with MW, SK. It is a well-known fact that women of various social categories would often tutor one another in sexual behavior prior to marriage, since both virginity and sexual prowess were highly-valued attributes in a wife. If these relationships continued after the women were married, we do not have records of them. See Helen F. Codere, *The Biography of an African Society: Rwanda 1900-1960: Based on Forty-Eight Rwandan Autobiographies* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique central), 1973.
[12] Alison Liebhafsky Des Forges, *Defeat Is the Only Bad News: Rwanda under Musinga, 1896 -1931* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 219.

of an elite. Boys in *intore* training learned dance and to write and perform poetry, as well as the types of social interactions to which they were expected to conform.

Intore training, then, was not conceptually different from elite male single-sex initiations in a variety of historical contexts. The Greek case is perhaps the most famous, including the Sacred Band of Thebes, a military unit reserved specifically for warriors and their adolescent male lovers.[13] Roman patricians also often took adolescent male lovers in order to tutor them into manhood, and because taking such a lover was a sign of wealth and sophistication. It was considered an honor for the young men, who were also of the upper-class.[14] The Japanese *bushidō* was a culture that celebrated the beauty of the male form and love between warriors.[15] Global research trends indicate a correlation between elite warrior groups and the development of a socially-acceptable, and often celebrated, tradition of elite male same-sex practices. While these interactions intersected with other socially constructed norms (gender, age-groups, etc.), and are thus best studied within their own cultural contexts, it is important to understand that intimate relations between men of elite status have historically been common, and that these practices are not unique to any particular culture or region.

This is not to imply, however, that same-sex desire and behavior between men at the Rwandan court was merely situational. Rather, it is only to illustrate that in terms of

[13] David Leitao, "The Legend of the Sacred Band," in *The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome*, edited by Martha Craven Nussbaum and Juha Sihvola (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 143-69.
[14] James L. Butrica, "Some Myths and Anomalies in the Study of Roman Sexuality," in *Same-Sex Desire and Love in Greco-Roman Antiquity and in the Classical Tradition of the West*, edited by Beert C. Verstraete and Vernon Provencal (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2005).
[15] See Gregory M. Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), particularly Chapters 1 and 2; also, Tsuneo Watanabe and Junichi Iwata, *Love of the Samurai: A Thousand Years of Japanese Homosexuality* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1989).

socialization, intimate relations between elite men were, as Vansina writes, an accepted part of life. Some elite men, and especially particular *bami*, were well-known for their proclivities toward men, and Gahindiro was one of these kings. He had several prominent male lovers, including not only Rugaju, but Nyarwaya of Mbayayingabo, the son of the famous female ritualist Nyiramuhanda. While it is reasonable to think that Gahindiro may have had female lovers as well, since it was not uncommon for noblemen to have sex with their female servants or even other noblemen's wives, it is his male lovers who are the most famous and powerful, or in the case of Rugaju, infamous.

The questions at the heart of previous studies of African sexualities have important ramifications for our understanding of the nature of elite male same-sex practices in monarchical Rwanda. The study of African sexuality is as old as the academic study of Africa itself, and was connected to the colonial project of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The overarching perception by early observers of Africa was that same-sex practices did not occur organically. The colonial European view of Africans as the most primitive humans only allowed for wanton heterosexuality.[16] The failure of Europeans to comprehend the differences in the ways in which sexual intimacy and sexual transgression were perceived in African societies contributed to profound misunderstandings about the construction and performance of gender and sexuality in African societies both prior to and during colonialism.

A common theme throughout the literature on African sexualities is just how differently African cultures perceive the idea of "sex." In many cases, reproduction and

[16] Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, eds., *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of Africa Homosexualities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998). Also Marc Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa?: The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008).

the erotic are very different things, and are not considered to be part of a collective whole. Marc Epprecht, who has written extensively on the history of male same-sex practices in southern Africa, writes, "Sex, by customary definition, was rather an act that served to propagate the lineage, to connect one politically to another family, and to connect one metaphysically to the ancestors."[17] By defining sex in this fashion, Epprecht can explain why intimate relations between men or between women were not always considered "sex" by these standards, and why the tolerance of these practices so mystified Europeans, to whom any genital or corporeal intimate contact was apparently sexual.

This becomes particularly important when considering these intimacies as part of a larger investigation of social interaction, and in exploring how these intimacies intersect with notions of gender, socio-economic status, and political power. The words we use to describe behaviors, desires, relationships, and orientations must necessarily correspond to the lived reality of these identities and interactions within their own cultural context. Neville Hoad notes, "The forms of intimacy, genital and other, between bodies … may signify kinship, power, shifting systems of gender, pedagogy, age-group socialization, and even pleasure. However, the case for sexuality as an organizing rubric is assumed rather than made."[18] Hoad uses the term "intimacies" to indicate the nature of these relationships, but chooses terminology that de-centers the very European understanding of "sex," allowing more room for understanding these practices and relationships as significant in different ways. Hoad's work situates same-sex intimacies in Africa within a

[17] Marc Epprecht, *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 132.
[18] Neville Hoad, *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xxiv.

context of globalization and neo-colonialism, and this includes questions about the various ways in which scholarship on same-sex practices and relationships can be used for political purposes in the present-day North Atlantic World. He asserts that labeling these same-sex intimacies as "homosexualities," even allowing for a wider understanding of the term, is a form of imperialism because it still privileges modern (post-nineteenth century) North Atlantic understandings of sex, sexuality and identity. Hoad argues that by focusing on these intimacies as "sexual," we miss the variety of other ways these relationships are significant in their own cultural contexts, and what we can learn from them about power, kinship, identity, and gender. In the case of the *umutoni* and his role in the Rwandan monarchical system, it is not enough to simply acknowledge intimate corporeal relations; instead, these behaviors and relationships should be considered within their own context. The case of Rugaju presents an excellent opportunity to analyze how a particular type of intimacy gave an individual access to legitimate power, and the significant influence that individual could have on historical developments.

Drawing on J. F. Faupel's *African Holocaust*, Neville Hoad discusses a moment of crisis about understandings of male same-sex practices in Buganda.[19] These same-sex practices were an accepted part of elite life in societies throughout the interlacustrine region, as was gender transgression. This earlier literature, like most academic work produced during the colonial period, requires reading against the original intentions and understandings of the text. The crisis lying at the center of Faupel's and Hoad's analyses originated in the shifting understandings of sex and morality that accompanied mass conversion to Christianity in the nineteenth century. But it also was deeply ingrained in

[19] J.F. Faupel, *African Holocaust: The Story of the Uganda Martyrs* (New York: P. J. Kennedy, 1962).

changing popular notions about monarchical power, and in a deepening divide between the Bugandan court and its subjects.

The case of Gahindiro's lovers illustrates why we cannot simply attribute a single meaning or narrative to the existence of royal male lovers. Both Nyarwaya of Mbayayingabo and Rugaju experienced significant advantages due to their close personal relationships with Gahindiro. Nyarwaya became his most trusted ritualist, which put his lineage in a position of considerable power. Rugaju, though, ascended to heights previously unheard of for someone who did not descend from one of the great families. Instead of being simply another lover, Gahindiro seems to have been completely besotted with Rugaju, so much so that he ceded much of his own political authority to him, and stories abound of Gahindiro's willingness to grant Rugaju almost any whim.[20] Love affairs of this kind were rarer, but not unheard of in the interlacustrine region, even for kings. They figure prominently within the canon of oral traditions, and most clearly in the *ibiteékerezo*, which were popular historical narratives about prominent court figures, but which were told by commoners.

One of the most heralded love stories among the traditions of the region is that of Burundian king Ntare III and his favorite Gikori. They led their armies to invade Rwanda in pursuit of the Bugeseran king Nsoro in the mid-eighteenth century, and Mwami Yuhi III Mazimpaka (r. c. 1735-c.1754) routed their forces at his court in Kamonyi, present-day south-central Rwanda.[21] Ntare was fatally wounded during the battle, and as he lay dying, he called for Gikori to be brought to him in order that they might die together.

[20] Vansina collection, Gahindiro file, T, 23, for example.
[21] Mazimpaka was renowned for his beauty, and love poetry written (allegedly) by him and for him abounds. See Vansina collection, Mazimpaka file.

"Those who love each other do not leave each other," he is reported to have said, before Gikori was killed on his orders.[22] Another account has Gikori coming to Ntare of his own accord, and of Ntare and Gikori falling on one another's swords, with Ntare saying, "Die together; a much-beloved dies with his lover."[23]

The lack of these kinds of dramatic scenes in the traditions dealing with Gahindiro and Rugaju do not indicate that they were not lovers; the consensus among both Rwandan and foreign scholars seems to be that they were, especially given that a few of the accounts seem based on Peter Schumacher's *ubucurabwenge* (court historian) informant Kayijuka. Rather, this relative silence gives us insight into how notable this was for storytellers and Westerners who recorded their stories and observed court life. We know that even during the reign of Mwami Musinga, the first *mwami* to rule during colonialism, male same-sex intimacies continued to flourish, including on the part of Musinga himself.[24] But in contrast to Buganda, where missionaries' and colonial officers' reports are rife with references to *Kabaka* (Luganda for "king") Mwanga's sexual proclivities and activities, there is virtually nothing in the official historical record that explicitly mentions these intimate practices in Rwanda. There are two likely and related explanations. The first is that Rwanda was not the object of very much colonial competition. While Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims all vied for religious hegemony over Buganda, the Catholic *Péres Blancs* were granted virtually unchallenged access to central Rwanda (though missionary activity outside of Nduga took a variety of different

[22] Vansina collection, Mazimpaka file, T, 1:3-4.
[23] *Ibid*., 6:4
[24] Des Forges, *Defeat is the Only Bad News*, 219.

forms).[25] In the case of Buganda, the religious rivalry seems to have ratcheted up the rhetorical hysteria over various forms of "sexual deviancy," and particularly over same-sex behaviors, which were often attributed by Europeans to Arab influence. Second, while Catholic and Protestant missionaries certainly clashed over their influence in newly-colonized parts of Africa, they were united in their opposition to Muslims. The Arab Slave Trade was used as a justification for colonialism in East Africa, and, as Neville Hoad points out, hostility toward sexual behavior that was perceived as part of the Arab influence became ingrained as an extended part of the "White Man's Burden" in Buganda.[26] For these reasons, concern about the sexual escapades of the Bugandan royal court were far more prominent in European minds as they set out to record and analyze Bugandan culture, and their attempts at conversion and colonization struck at the heart of the sexual activities of the Bugandan elite. In Rwanda, colonialism was far more about negotiation between the initially relatively weak German officers, Catholic missionaries, and the royal court. It was only after several decades that the Europeans gained the upper hand, and by that time, sexuality at the royal court was not paramount in their concerns.[27]

For our purposes here, an understanding of the role of the *umutoni* in elite circles is important in order to analyze the ways that power was gained and lost within the context of the royal court. We cannot generalize elite sexual norms for all of Rwandan society: both male same-sex practices as well as polygynous marriage were practiced amongst the elite, but not necessarily throughout society at large. One local historian

[25] For missionary activity in central Rwanda and at the mwami's court, see Des Forges, *Defeat is the Only Bad News*. For examples in Kinyaga, see Catharine Newbury, The *Cohension of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988);
[26] Hoad, *African Intimacies*, 6. It is not my intention to conflate Arabs with Muslims as though the two groups are one and the same, but rather to convey the mindset of the Europeans colonizing East Africa. This conflation was at the heart of their rationale for colonization and zealous conversions.
[27] See Des Forges, *Defeat is the Only Bad News*, particularly Chapters 7-9.

explained that the lives of elites were always somewhat accepted as different and eccentric, because common people just assumed that wealth and power allowed people to do "strange" things.[28] In other words, common people never expected to behave themselves like the elites, because they were not elite. A common farmer would not have multiple wives because of the simple fact that he could not support them. If the *ibiteékerezo* focus on the eccentricities and extraordinary dramas of elite life, it is because these stories were meant to entertain as well as inform, not unlike what Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Guilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz called "the Flash Press" in their book about ribald and sensationalist men's weeklies in mid-nineteenth century New York.[29] A storyteller's primary job was to tell stories to his community; his highest ambition was to be invited to tell his stories before nobility, or even at the court of the *mwami*.[30] For this reason, he could add embellishments or flourish, but would not want to slander or lie.

The development of a freer sexual ethos is a common occurrence in many elite circles. Monarchies around the world have been known for their indulgences in practices that would be considered "exotic" to most common people; wealthy elites today in the arenas of entertainment or sport are much the same – would most "average" Americans replicate Elizabeth Taylor's eight marriages? This was also the case in the Nyiginya kingdom. Members of the royal court were expected to participate in particular aspects of elite sexual culture because that was the way sophisticated people were supposed to behave. Just as it would be very strange for a common farmer to have more than one

[28] Interview with MW.
[29] Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
[30] Jan Vansina, "Historical Tales (Ibiteekerezo) and the History of Rwanda," *History in Africa* 27 (2000), 375-414.

wife, it would have been odd for nobility to practice monogamy. Within this space, however, existed a wider range of possibilities for elites. Men were often required to marry particular women for political reasons, but because they could marry multiple women, they could also marry for multiple reasons. The *mwami* was the elite of the elite: he married and took lovers for political reasons, as part of ritual duties, and also because of genuine affection and attraction.

Gahindiro's reasons for becoming intimately involved with Rugaju are nowhere explicitly laid out. However, as the companion of his childhood and trusted advisor, it is easy to speculate that their relationship was based on a variety of motivations. Rugaju gained extraordinary political power and an official position at court, though this position was political, and not part of the ritual aspects of kingship. Gahindiro gained a loyal friend and politically-savvy advisor. Both gained life-long companionship. With such an arrangement, it seems plausible that other figures jockeying for influence at court would see Gahindiro's relationship with Rugaju as dangerous to their own ambitions, and may even have decided that actions must be taken in order to bring about Rugaju's downfall. One of these potential challengers had more to gain than all the others, since her lineage and political connections had already set her up to became a formidable power broker. This challenger, of course, was Nyiramongi.

The *Umwamikazi* in Nyiginya Rwanda

Abwamikazi, or queens, occupied an important place in the monarchical system of Rwanda. They were administrators, judges, and ritual participants. They were also

important to their families as a way of gaining access and influence on the *mwami* and at court. While the evidence suggests that many queens quietly performed their roles as wives, ritual practitioners, and mothers without becoming overtly involved in politics, there were notable exceptions to this rule, including Nyiramongi. From the beginning, she seems to have appreciated her importance as an *umwamikazi* from the matridynastic Ega clan, and done everything in her power to build a political network that was loyal to her. This political network is referred to by many local historians as an "*akazu*," which literally translates to "little house."[31] The term has a particularly charged historical and political meaning today, as it was used before the 1994 genocide to describe the inner circle of radicals and militants loyal to the First Lady Agathe Habyarimana, and who are credited with masterminding the genocide.[32] But as one interviewee pointed out, Mme. Habyarimana was hardly the first prominent Rwandese woman to build such a system. *Abagabekazi* (queen mothers) such as Nyiramongi and Kanjogera were notorious for their political maneuvering and ability to attract clients. All evidence suggests that Nyiramongi began construction of her *akazu* as queen, and that this may have been a factor in earning her Rugaju's mistrust and, ultimately, outright hostility.

The most important component of Nyiramongi's *akazu* was her brother, Rwakagara. He became her close advisor at court, as well as an advisor to Gahindiro, but his interests lay in promoting the wealth and influence of his lineage. Indeed, he

[31] There is debate over the accuracy of this term as it relates to political networks like Nyiramongi's. Some scholars argue that an akazu is, by its nature, a secret place to meet in order to plot, as opposed to factions that existed out in the open. Others, however, contend that the secretive nature of the akazu is a more recent development. Interviews with MW, SM, CK.

[32] Filip Reyntjens, *L'Afrique des grands lacs en crise: Rwanda, Burundi, 1988–1994* (Karthala, Paris, 1994), 189–90. Reyntjens and others critical of the post-genocide Rwandan Patriotic Front's government use the term to describe the small group of very powerful Tutsi returnees who have accumulated a large amount of wealth and power under the patronage of President Paul Kagame. This usage supports the less-secretive use of the word, as Kagame's patronage of these Tutsi elites is a well-known fact.

established a line of descendants that included the last two *abagabekazi* of the Rwandan monarchy, as well as the *bami* Musinga and Rudahigwa. Rwakagara was joined in his sister's faction by Marara, who headed the army Itángānzwa, or "The Invincibles." This army is one of the most celebrated in stories and songs, and became particularly famous for its revolt against Rugaju, who tried to appoint a different chief to lead it.[33] Further, Rugaju took credit for Marara's victory over the Mushi in present-day eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, which according to at least one account was a major rout, and should have brought Marara much acclaim as a general, since the victory came complete with the heads and genitals of the conquered Mushi leaders to imbue the royal drum with their power.[34] His conflict with Rugaju made him a natural ally for Nyiramongi. Finally, the ritualist Nyarwaya of Mbayayingo, who was Gahindiro's lover and led the powerful army *Abakemba*, "The Carvers," joined Nyiramongi's faction after another of his armies, *Imvejuru*, "The Fallen from Heaven," gave her a gift of two silos of grain and sorghum during a famine, in order that she might continue to feed her people.[35] These powerful army chiefs in her *akazu* gave Nyiramongi not only wealthy clients with important lineages, but also access to some of the most powerful armies, stationed around the country and on the frontier. Rwakagara was her link to her lineage, which she wanted to keep strong. Nyarwaya of Mbayayingo was a warrior at the head of two armies with the connections to keep her clients happy and productive, as well as being the most

[33] Alexis Kagame, *Les milices du Rwanda precolonial* (Brussels: Academie royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 1963), 146-47.
[34] Vansina collection, Rwogera file, H, 6.
[35] Alexis Kagame, *Le code des institutions politiques du Rwanda précolonial, par Alexis Kagame* (Bruxelles: Institut royal colonial belge, 1952), 47. Identifying Nyarwaya by his father's name is important, because there are at least three other prominent men named "Nyarwaya" at court during this period. "Nyarwaya was a common name during the last few centur[ies], being a suitable name for one destined to become [a] warrior: it refers to efficiency in booty-taking, and thus to one who enriches the kingdom in cattle – Great-Booty-Taker. The booty is cattle of course." Rose-Marie Mukarutabana, personal communication, 17 November 2013.

important ritual practitioner in Gahindiro's court. Marara was a proven general with a deeply personal grudge against Rugaju. Together with Nyiramongi's own political cunning, they formed a formidable network capable of challenging even the *mwami*'s official favorite and functional co-ruler.

In creating her own *akazu*, and particularly in counting within it a ritualist of Nyarwaya of Mbayayingo's stature, Nyiramongi both continued and strengthened the tradition of the politicization of ritual spaces by *abagabekazi* that had begun under Nyiratunga. Nyiramuhanda was given a place on the *abiiru* because of her willingness to sacrifice herself and her son for the good of the *mwami* and the kingdom, and now her son continued in her footsteps. But this precedent of choosing particularly worthy individuals to serve as part of the corporations of ritualists that served the court gave later monarchs, like Nyiramongi, the ability to manipulate this very potent source of royal power and legitimacy. Nyiramongi's patronage of Nyarwaya of Mbayayingo was part of this, and emboldened her to use the *abiru* (court ritual practitioners) as she chose once she ascended to *umugabekazi*, and indeed to sometimes ignore them altogether.[36]

Nyiramongi's *akazu* was built through a system of patronage, as were most political networks within Rwanda. This patronage could take many forms, but often involved the gift of a cow in usufruct and the promise of protection in exchange for loyalty and servitude. *Ubuhake* clientship, which was the most important type of clientship in central Rwanda, made the client a servant of the patron, who would provide the patron with various goods and services. The relationship was hereditary, and could

[36] Alexis Kagame, *Un abrège de l'ethno-histoire du Rwanda, T. 1* (Butare, Rwanda: Editions universitaires du Rwanda, 1972), 211.

only be ended by the patron, at which time he could claim not only his original cow, but also all of the client's cattle.[37]

Ubuhake clientship certainly existed in central Rwanda during Gahindiro's reign, but there is little evidence to suggest that it was particularly widespread. To the contrary, it was one of several different types of clientship in the interlacustrine region and in Rwanda as a whole. Alexis Kagame's work, particularly his *Les milices du Rwanda precolonial* (1963) and *L'histoire des armées-bovines dans l'ancien Rwanda* (1961), details the histories of armies and cattle herds created by *bami* and *abagabekazi*, which were then given over to the supervision of their favorites. The royal herds could be used as the basis for clientship networks, which connected sub-patrons and their clients to the monarchy. In this way did *bami* and *abagabekazi* create factions? The marriage of cattle wealth and military might have helped reign in those who would have otherwise been tempted to challenge the central court. On the other hand, as Vansina points out, accommodating the ever-growing offspring of the great families was a challenge for the monarchy, which had to constantly look for ways to bring in more cattle, and thus more herding land, and then had to create armies in order to protect this new land. It is this impetus to preserve the central power of the court that led to nearly continuous military campaigns in the nineteenth century.

Nyiramongi built her *akazu* the same way as other political figures built factions. She created three armies for her brother, Rwakagara, and two cattle herds, and commanded several more of each that she inherited as queen and upon ascension as

[37] Jacques Jérôme Pierre Maquet, *The Premise of Inequality in Ruanda: A Study of Political Relations in a Central African Kingdom* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). For an excellent regional and historical critique of Maquet, see C. Newbury, Cohesion.

umugabekazi. These armies and herds gave her the tools to reward her supporters and deprive those who displeased her of wealth and status. But they were also a source of contention between her and her husband, who took two of her armies and two of her herds and gave them to Rugaju. Functionally, this did not inhibit her from exercising power as queen, or of building up her *akazu*. Since the armies given to Rugaju came at the expense not only of Nyiramongi but also of her brother Rwakagara, they undermined Gahindiro's position with a powerful lineage of the Ega clan, and earned Rugaju animosity from two very powerful individuals. This type of incident is but one example of the growing conflict between Rugaju and Nyiramongi, whose political careers each were predicated upon their intimate relationships with Gahindiro. In appeasing his lover, he weakened his wife's position. But while Rugaju's status resulted almost solely due to his relationship with Gahindiro, Nyiramongi was buffeted by her increasingly powerful lineage, the Abagereka of the Ega. It is perhaps her position not only as queen, but as a daughter of the Ega, which ultimately gave her the advantage over Rugaju.

Nyiramongi's use of clientship networks indicates a growing trend in the nineteenth century. Unlike previous *abagabekazi*, who used their political networks to benefit their sons, at least according to oral tradition, Nyiramongi's bolstered her own power. Previous scholarship has characterized these networks of patronage as connecting all of Rwanda to the *mwami* through patronage, making the *mwami* the ultimate patron of the country. In analyzing how nineteenth-century *abagabekazi* used their patronage networks to their own gain, we are forced to consider how this model of joint-rulership created both a challenge and a check upon kingly power. By the time she ascended to her full power as *umugabekazi* (after Gahindiro's death), Nyiramongi commanded not only a powerful *akazu*, but an extensive patronage network that owed nothing to her son,

Rwogera, who was only a child. The problems created by this rivalry between *umugabekazi* and *mwami* are borne out in detail in the oral traditions for this reign (and the subsequent reigns of Rwabugiri/Murorunkwere and Musinga/Kanjogera), we are left to wonder if this is a new innovation brought about by the political cunning and personal ambitions of Nyiramongi and her Ega descendants, or if this was an established pattern of rule by previous *abagabekazi*. Because the existing historical narratives are so thin on details about these earlier women, any conclusions we may draw are necessarily based on conjecture. However, Nyiramongi is treated with singular interest by the storytellers and historians, particularly within the *ibitéekerezo*. Given her characterization by these men, to interpret her as uniquely innovative would not be a stretch.

Nyiramongi became an *umwamikazi* in part because she was from a matridynastic clan. *Bami* usually married at least one woman from each of these clans in order to lend credence to the idea that a woman from any of these clans could become the next *umugabekazi*. In reality, however, the Ega exercised almost complete hegemony over this position for the last two centuries of the monarchy's existence. Next to the Nyiginya themselves, the Ega were the wealthiest and most powerful of the Rwandan clans.

Bami also had the ritual responsibility to marry women from particular lineages. As discussed in chapter one, kingship in Rwanda was not so much "divine kingship," in which the king is considered a god in mortal flesh, but rather ritual kingship, in which the king acts as a priest and chief mediator between his people and the divine. Embedded in the royal rituals were rites involving marriage and marital intercourse between the *mwami* and a wife of a particular lineage. For example, the annual *umuganura*, or "first fruits" ritual requires that the *mwami* and his Ega wife "receive" one another in order to bless the

fertility of the sorghum and millet crops.[38] David Newbury explains that the Swere lineage of the Ega clan served as ritualists for the Tsobe "ritual king," who was the most prominent ritual practitioner in the kingdom and the central figure in the *umuganura* ritual. The Swere were charged with guarding "the ritual purity of the Tsobe king."[39] The Ega, in this ritual, acted as mediators between the Tsobe ritualist and people, objects, or activities that could be considered common or ritually impure, like ordinary farmers, hoes, or planting sorghum.

It is important to understand, in this context, the social status and assumptions about the Ega clan. In Kinyarwanda, "Ega" means "the opposite shore." This comes from an origin myth about Mututsi, one of the three sons of Heaven. According to the myth, there has always been a strict cultural taboo in Rwanda against incest, including marriage between a niece and uncle or nephew and aunt. As such, with the only available women in Rwanda being the daughters of his brothers, Mututsi had to look elsewhere for a wife. He went to the river Kagera, separating Rwanda from Karagwe (a kingdom contemporary to the Nyiginya monarchy that is now part of western Tanzania), and sent his brother across to fetch him a wife from "the opposite side."[40] This, of course, is only a myth. Delmas argues, in fact, that Mututsi did in fact marry his own niece, Sukiranya, and that they produced a son, Surwega, who is the (almost certainly mythological) ancestor of the Ega clan. Their second son, Ntandayera, was the father of both Mukono and Muha, and ancestors of the Kono and Ha clans, which were the other two

[38] André Coupez, and Marcel D'Hertefelt, *La royauté sacrée de l'ancien Rwanda: texte, traduction et commentaire de son rituel* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique central, 1964), viii.
[39] David Newbury, "What Role Has Kingship?: An Analysis of the Umuganura Ritual of Rwanda as Presented in Marcel D'hertefelt and Andre Coupez La Royaute Sacree De L'ancien Rwanda (1964)," Africa-Tervuren XXVII, no. 4 (1981), 93.
[40] Léon Delmas, *Généalogies de la noblesse du Ruanda: (Les Batutsi*), (Kabgayi: Vicariat apostolique du Ruanda, 1950).

matridynastic clans. As is clear from this story, while there were four matridynastic clans, the Ega were considered the most important.

Delmas, like many other colonial-era researchers, simply accepted origin myths as historical fact, or at least assumed that the Rwandans they spoke to believed these stories literally.[41] In reality, these mythical individuals probably never existed, and instead likely indicate groups of people. They may hold clues to the early origins of the Rwandan monarchy and the Nyiginya dynasty that ruled it. For our purposes, however, these origin myths, collected and compiled around the same time as the court rituals, hold a different sort of importance: they provide us with a way of understanding the dynamics of the "great family" politics that drove political developments during the last century of the monarchy. These myths were collected with other forms of Rwandan oral tradition beginning in the late nineteenth century. As such, some stories were used in particular ways to explain the society as it existed at the time they were recorded. Catharine Newbury's critique of Maquet's "premise of inequality" is salient in this situation as well: it is clear from the dynastic lists that women from clans other than Ega, Kono, and Ha had once served as *abagabekazi*, but that these clans became more powerful following the structural changes enacted in the mid-eighteenth century by Rujugira. Some of these clans, including the Gesera, Zigaba, and Singa, who have been historically associated with regions outside of central Rwanda, were by the mid-twentieth century strongly identified as "Hutu" clans, positioning them as historical opponents of the Tutsi monarchy, and therefore a symbol of not only regional but ethnic resistance to the

[41] This was a common mistaken assumption of colonial-era researchers, both in Africa and in other parts of the world. Whether or not indigenous people took literally their myths and prophecies is a matter of enormous debate in, for example, studies of the Pacific Islands. See for example Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); and for a counterpoint, Marshall Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

centralizing control of the Nyiginya.[42] The inclusion of these clans within the official dynastic lists of *abagabekazi*, as compiled by Kagame, may indicate a few things, but one of the most plausible is the attempt to provide a historical basis for Nyiginya control of the regions associated with these clans. Kagame's lists were published within the context of growing discontent with monarchical rule, particularly outside of Nduga.[43] Kagame himself was a vigorous supporter of the monarchy, as were the court sources which formed the basis of his information. Since the monarchy was interested in self-preservation, it is likely that oral sources emanating from the court, including the dynastic lists, were used to bolster the legitimacy of the institution during a time of enormous transition and instability.[44]

While the origin myths may attribute an earlier genesis of the power dynamics at play in the kingdom during the nineteenth century, other historical sources demonstrate otherwise. In particular, as Newbury points out, is that the colonial period, and its intense volume of research into the history of Rwanda, began during a time in which the Tutsi elite were at once at the height of their power, but also fighting to maintain that control. As such, myth, ritual, and other types of oral tradition may have been manipulated in order to validate and solidify that power. To accept such sources uncritically, and without

[42] David Newbury, "The Clans of Rwanda: An Historical Hypothesis," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 50, 4 (1980), 389-403; also, Christopher C. Taylor, *Milk, Honey, and Money: Changing Concepts in Rwandan Healing* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).
[43] For excellent analyses of the origins of this discontent, see Mary Catharine Atterbury, "Revolution in Rwanda," (Madison: African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin, 1970); and, Rene Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).
[44] For other examples of Kagame's politicization of oral traditions, see David Newbury, "Trick Cyclists? Reconceptualizing Rwandan Dynastic Chronology," *History in Africa* 21 (1994), 191-217. It is important to note that Kagame was not doing something unique with this type of use of oral tradition. Vansina persuasively demonstrates that an understanding of the social and political context in which oral traditions are collected must be part of any analysis of oral sources, just as understanding the social and political of written sources is imperative in order to properly employ them as tools for historical analysis. See Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

contextualizing them within the historical moment in which they were recorded, is to lose part of their meaning.

In the royal rituals, the most important female roles are performed by wives from the three matridynastic clans: Ega, Kono, and Ha. By the mid-nineteenth century, when Nyiramongi was building her power base, there was no question as to the most influential of these three clans. The Ega provided the vast majority of *abagabekazi*, and this trend was more and more apparent in later centuries, so that after the time of Rujugira (r. 1772-1786), the position of *umugabekazi* effectively became an Ega position.[45] An Ega *umwamikazi* filled a prominent role in *umuganura*, an annual ritual symbolizing sustained fertility for the kingdom. However, the *mwami* could be married to more than one Ega woman, and usually was. Nyiramongi arranged it so that her son married multiple women from her own Abagereka lineage of the Ega clan, and no one else, except for ritual purposes. While this study draws on collected text of the royal rituals, we do not have records of how they were performed each year, which means we do not know which queens participated in which roles. We can speculate, though, that those designated to become *umugabekazi* may have been heavily involved in the performance of these rituals, in order to prepare for their future role in them.

Because the royal rituals created the foundation for political legitimacy in the kingdom, those who performed the rituals held an important place in the imagination of the population. Some rituals, like *umuganura*, were attended by people from around the country, often because rituals involved the *mwami*, his ritual practitioners, or other court

[45] The one exception was Rwabugiri's Kono mother, Murorunkwere. She, however, like her Kono forebear Nyamarembo, mother of Mazimpaka (r. c. 1735-c. 1754), was killed by her son, along with her political faction at court.

figures to travel to divergent parts of the country in order to perform particular rites. This gave political power in Rwanda a face and a name. For this reason, the opportunity to take part in the rituals would have been important for *abwamikazi* who wished to become *umugabekazi*, and it is likely that there was intense competition to be selected by both queens and their families.

Aside from the ritually required marriages and those of political expediency, *bami* also occasionally married because they "met someone they just liked."[46] This type of marriage, while less common, was a political wild card that sometimes produced incredibly volatile historical circumstances, as in the case of Rwabugiri's alleged marriage to Muhumusa/Muserekande. But a marriage of this variety was not necessarily mutually exclusive of the other two. From all historical accounts, there seems to have been some level of mutual affection between Gahindiro and Nyiramongi. It may have been this combination of her family's political power, Gahindiro's fondness for her, and Nyiramongi's own cunning as a political actor that made her such a potent rival for Rugaju.

The Wife vs. the Lover

We know from the historical narratives and oral traditions that Nyiramongi's and Rugaju's factions were set against one another, and that they employed increasingly violent tactics in order to destroy one another, particularly in the aftermath of Gahindiro's death in 1845. What is decidedly unclear is the origin of this conflict. Kagame's work gives few details, other than to imply that there was most certainly tension between

[46] Interview with MW.

Rugaju and Nyiramongi, which eventually gave way to outright hostility at the hands of her faction. He does not tie Nyiramongi personally to Rugaju's downfall, however. In fact, there are little to no mentions of either Nyiramongi or Rugaju in much of the analytical work on the monarchical period. Vansina more generally explains that favorites like Rugaju were never able to found lasting powerful lineages, "since by definition they were the sworn enemies of all the other elites."[47]

This becomes particularly important within the social and political context of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during what Vansina refers to as the "triumph of the great families." While the ritual aspect of kingship was an important component of the maintenance of legitimacy for the Rwandan monarchy,[48] what became apparent during the civil war after Ndabarasa's death in 1796 was that the important lineages and their factions must be placated in order to maintain peace and stability. These lineages, in Vansina's estimation, constituted an oligarchy that maintained power through the reigns of both Gahindiro and Rwogera, neither of whom was able to circumvent or co-opt it.

Gahindiro's attempt to rival the great families was to establish his own rival faction through Rugaju. Since Rugaju did not come from a powerful lineage himself, Gahindiro may have felt that with Rugaju's support, and especially with the powerful armies Gahindiro had given him, they would be able to take on the great families together. In this Gahindiro was sadly mistaken. His efforts to strengthen his own power as *mwami* through Rugaju did not lead to an increase in monarchical power. Rather, in Vansina's phrase, it led to Gahindiro "becoming Rugaju's man."[49] In other words, the

[47] Vansina, *Antecedents*, 87.
[48] D. Newbury, "What Role Has Kingship?"; also, Coupez and d'Hertefelt, *La royaute sacrée*.
[49] Vansina, *Antecedents*, 149.

monarchy had become one in which power was shared by the very factions previous *bami* had created in order to cement their own authority.

This new reality of monarchical rule in Rwanda made life more complicated for court figures, who were constantly jockeying for favors and engaging in ever-more violent intrigues in order to secure their status. Combined with the importance of lineage identity in the social politics of the day, patrons had to be very careful of how they distributed favors, since the reallocation of a herd or army could earn one not simply the animosity of the deprived party, but also his or her family.

It is for this reason that Gahindiro's redistribution of Nyiramongi's armies and herds from Rwakagara to Rugaju may have been a major source of the conflict between Nyiramongi and Rugaju. It was no secret that Rugaju really ran the show at Gahindiro's court, and therefore a safe assumption that Rugaju was behind the decision. By depriving Rwakagara of armies and wealth, Rugaju simultaneously enriched himself at the expense of a potential rival, built up his own lineage and network, since he in turn reallocated many armies and herds to family members, and dealt a blow to Rwakagara and his Abagereka lineage of the Ega clan, to which Nyiramongi also belonged. It is entirely possible that Rugaju meant only to strike at Rwakagara and not Nyiramongi. He may have considered her a non-entity, since she was only a queen at the time and her son had not yet been named Gahindiro's heir. Moroever, he may have simply been arrogant enough to assume that his own ascendancy would make him powerful enough to rival the Abagereka. However, a narrative from Vansina's collection of *ibitéekerezo* suggests that the motive was more personal in nature.

Récit de Nyiramavugo (Nyiramongi's regnal name when she became *umugabekazi*) gives a selective account of Nyiramongi's political biography. According to this account, which is the only one that covers the time period before Nyiramongi married Gahindiro, describes her as growing up in poverty in her father, Gaaga's, house.[50] Though Gaaga's line would become very powerful through the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was mostly through Nyiramongi and her brother Rwakagara that their fortunes improved. Gaaga himself was a modest herder, though it is likely that the storyteller exaggerated her family's poverty in order to portray her as a farm girl, innocent of the politics of the royal court. According to this story, Gahindiro was already king when Nyiramongi came to his attention (though perhaps he had not reached his majority) and he sent for her. Rugaju, however, appears to have decided that he wanted to marry Nyiramongi himself, and instead of proposing a marriage between them to her father, he sent a warrior named Bideenge to attack Gaaga so he could take her.

The plausibility of this story rests in how one understands Rugaju's relationship to Gahindiro. It is apparent that the two were lovers, and that Rugaju exercised an enormous amount of influence over Gahindiro, who seems to have been willing to give Rugaju almost anything he wanted. In another story, Gahindiro refuses to do anything—eating, sleeping, bathing, or marrying—unless the same opportunities are given to Rugaju.[51] It is possible, then, that Rugaju used this as a way to get everything he wanted, regardless of who was inconvenienced in the process. This appears to be the case with Nyiramongi. As a way to show his power in the kingdom, and over the king himself, he sent one of his

[50] Vansina collection, Rwogera file, H, 1.
[51] Vansina collection, Gahindiro file, T, 23.

clients, Bideenge, to attack Gaaga and take Nyiramongi from him in order to marry her. This would demonstrate not only that his faction at court was strong, but that he was functionally the ruler of the kingdom, since he could take what he wanted even from the *mwami*.

Gaaga, however, thwarted Bideenge, moving his entire household twice, and eventually settling in Gisaanze (present-day northern Burundi). Bideenge found them there, and set upon Nyiramongi while she was churning butter. The description of the attack is disturbing in its implications. Nyiramongi is described as wearing her first skin, which would mean that she was quite young, though of child-bearing age. When Bideenge attacked the household, he is described as having "uprooted the pillar from the entrance to the house."[52] Symbolically, for a man to do this in another man's house was to challenge the owner's patriarchal authority in his own home. To do so was to question his ability to provide for the women of his household, as well as threaten his ownership of his land and cows. It was also a way to dispute a patron's ability to protect his clients. In short, to uproot the pillar from a man's house was to undermine his position as a man on his hill and within the larger political community, and to lay claim to all that was his.

Gaaga begged Bideenge to leave his household alone, offering him a cow as ransom. Bideenge scoffed at the offer, saying that he had received cows from Gahindiro and "even Rugaju," yet another subtle implication that Rugaju was the real power in the kingdom, and calling Gaaga a "petty Hima" as an nsult.[53] The ethnonym "Hima" was

[52] Vansina collection, Rwogera file, H, 1.
[53] In the Kinyarwanda version of the story, the word used for cow is "ngweb," implying the cattle is foreign. It is derived from "gavu," itself an adaptation of "gav," a Hindi word for "cow." This implies the cattle are from an area east of Rwanda that had dealings with the Swahili Coast. Rwanda's historical isolation, and perception of being the only civilized place on earth, as well as the extremely revered position of cattle within the society, Interview with MW.

used to describe herders in northeastern Rwanda and southeastern Uganda. Generally, Hima was understood as a group inferior to the "Tutsi" of central and southern Rwanda. While Hima inhabited a different social status than the common farmer, who would receive the universal designation of "Hutu" by the mid-twentieth century but certainly were not known as such during Gahindiro's reign, they were still regarded as common, versus the noble and royal Tutsi.[54] The existence of the Hima category demonstrates quite plainly why it is ahistorical to portray the ethnic categories that developed in twentieth-century Rwanda to earlier periods. Hima, by the standards set by the Belgian colonial officers, became Tutsi, though they were referred to as *petits-tutsi*, which denoted non-royal status. But as the condescending use of the term "Hima" demonstrates, Rwandans themselves did not see socio-economic identity as dichotomous until a much later period. Rather, wealth and status were mitigated not only by region, but also by the much more mundane vicissitudes of court politics. This point is even more salient when we consider that the story was recorded in 1960, during a period of extreme "ethnic" violence in Rwanda.[55]

Gaaga certainly had reason to fear Bideenge, and his patron Rugaju, because Gaaga does in fact seem to have been a relatively lower-class herder. Rugaju's relentless pursuit of Nyiramongi, who had already been promised to Gahindiro, put her father in an impossible situation. If he relinquished her to Rugaju, he would earn the ire of the *mwami*. If he refused Rugaju, he would make an enemy of the most powerful man in the country. The next part of the story is telling, however, because it reveals a significant

[54] For another use of "Hima" in a patronizing sense, see Vansina collection, T, 1. For the colonial definition, see Eugène Hurel, *Dictionnaire français-runyar-wanda et runyar-wanda-français* (Kabgayi: Vicariat apostolique du Rwanda, 1926), 317.

[55] For further analysis of the development of socio-political identity in Rwanda, see C. Newbury, *Cohesion*. Also, see David Newbury, "The Invention of Rwanda: The Alchemy of Ethnicity" Paper presented at the 38th annual meeting of the African Studies Association, Orlando, FL (1995).

amount about popular perceptions of Nyiramongi's character, and raises some troubling questions.

According to the *Récit,* Bideenge laughingly ridiculed Gaaga and his offer of a cow. Then,

> He uprooted the pillar in front of the house that he let fall on Nyiramavugo, behind the partition enclosure. Nyiramavugo was churning. The churn was braced between her hands and the milk trickled down her thighs. She jumped at the agitation to her skin. She was a girl dressed in her very first skin. She jumped at the agitation to her skin.
>
> She said: "Well, well, man, [if it] please God, [tomorrow] may he suffer the condemnation of the people, of the reigning king, and that he may be handed over to who it is who takes the throne."
>
> Bideenge, he responded to her: "Oh, girl, I know that all the girls coming from [Abe] Ega sustain themselves on the illusion of tomorrow, [that] they will reign." "The day," he added, "that you ascend to the throne, throw me to the field." "I am," he said, "capable of raising myself and this petty Hima, if it pleases God, his mother may be castrated."
>
> Nyiramavugo said: "Well, well, you see this man, that he may seem good, it is of little importance, hutu, tuutsi, because I don't know his race; Would that I was born a boy! She said "Thus, [it is] that you can't raise yourself, the way never came up that drives me to offer to Gahindiro, for me to offer to Rugaju and so that if he lets you stay in this suite to build."
>
> Gaaga got up quickly. He returns to the court, the king found him with Maiinha-Nyakibuungo. He acclaimed and told Gahindiro. Gahindro said: "Silence! Send for Rujaju." Ruagaju called out "Yes," responding to [Rugaju] [Gahindiro said], "what cause do you have to want this unimportant person?"
>
> The other [Rugaju] said: "The reason to want this unimportant person is because I decided to kill him before he went rotten. He refused me his daughter."
>
> The other [Gaaga] said: "I'll never let that happen while I live."
>
> The other [Gahindiro] said: "Rugaju, I beseech you, that which I ask of you, you can't refuse. And you, that which you demand, I cannot refuse you."[56]

[56] Vansina collection, Rwogera file, H, 1. Translation is mine.

In this passage, Nyiramongi becomes Nyiramavugo, as though even at this early age she is assuming the mantle of monarchical authority. It is unclear precisely what happens between her and Bideenge yet the sexual imagery is difficult to ignore. Ritually, the *mwami* gives milk to the ritual brides he marries as part of various rites. For example, in the *Inzira y'Umuriro*, or Festival of Fire, the *mwami* pours milk into churns belonging to "brides" from the Ha, Ega, Kono, Gesera, Tsobe, and other important lineages. The brides then churn the butter through the next stage of the ritual, until the *mwami* has ritual intercourse with the Ha bride, the climax of which is publicly acclaimed by the bride and her maternal uncle.[57] However, in the ritual the butter is given to the king in a special pot, and the milk is given to the cows to drink. The milk symbolizes the *mwami*'s role in providing for the nourishment of his people, and their continued fertility. It is important to note that the milk, initially poured by the *mwami*, must be churned by his brides before it is fit to be distributed to his people, and that the culmination of this part of the ritual involves ritually-prescribed intercourse with the first bride to whom he gave the milk. The milk, here, is a valuable resource, representing that which nourishes and extends life to the kingdom.

The milk-as-nourishment trope is inherent in Bideenge's taunts at Gaaga, when he cryptically says "may his mother be castrated." The phrasing is odd but probably refers to the cutting off of a woman's breasts. This is a symbolic action, particularly against Tutsi women, who served as milk maids to the royal court, and whose breastmilk also nourished future *bami*. To wish this type of mutilation on a woman was to wish infertility and ruin upon her family. Such a curse was not taken lightly, since fertility of people, cattle, and land were central to the legitimacy of the monarchy. Christopher Taylor

[57] Coupez and d'Hertefelt, *La royaunte sacrée*, 64-5.

describes how such imagery came horrifying to bear in the 1994 genocide, when the ritual mutilation of Tutsi women's breasts and genitals was part of the symbolic violence done to the victims.[58]

It is significant, then, that the milk in the *Récit* is not used to nourish, but rather is spilled onto Nyiramongi's thighs. This implies violence being done to one of the important "flows" in traditional Rwandan healing culture. Taylor's main argument in *Milk, Honey, and Money* is that "blockage" is understood to cause illness, whether individual or social.[59] But an equally integral aspect of his ethnography is the cultural understanding that excess or waste can be as detrimental to individual and social health. It is this concept that appears to be invoked in this incident between Bideenge and Nyiramongi. We are to understand that it is ultimately her, and not her father, who resists or "blocks" Bideenge from taking her, and this ultimately manifests itself in milk being spilled, spoiling her first skin.

The skin in this case refers to the animal skin which girls of childbearing age wore once they had physically matured. The skin was wrapped around the waist like a *kanga*, or sarong. The wearing of an animal skin was the signal of a girl's transition to womanhood. Bideenge's almost-spoiling of Nyiramongi's first skin seems to be representative of something larger. The imagery presented in this story with the butter and milk, the girl churning, the spoiling of the skin, and the defensive posture Nyiramongi takes in the aftermath of Bideenge "dropping the pillar" on her create a picture of an attempted sexual assault. It appears that it was attempted, rather than an

[58] Christopher C. Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994* (New York: Berg, 1999), particularly chapters 3 and 4.
[59] Taylor, *Milk, Honey, and Money*.

actuality, because it is improbable that Gahindiro would have married her had her virtue been compromised, given that her status as Ega would have put her in the running for *umugabekazi*, and there could have been questions about the paternity of her first child. Second, the stance she took in the aftermath of Bideenge's "dropping the pillar" on her: she stood confidently, shaking the skin as if to demonstrate that it remained intact. Finally, she demanded to be taken to the *mwami* and Rugaju on her own terms. Bideenge interpreted her defiance of him as stemming from her status as a woman of the Ega who "imagine that tomorrow, they will rule." This is a taunt ("throw me upon the field"), however, that is clearer in the original Kinyarwanda, and would be the equivalent of Bideenge saying, "If you're a queen, then I'm the Pope." Nyiramongi seems to be shedding any illusions that the men in her life would protect her. Her father had failed, as had her future husband. Instead, she would be the advocate for herself and for her family. In this way, the story indicates a possible motive for her political activities as queen. It also presents a plausible reason why she and Rugaju had lasting enmity between them.

The *Récit* shows that in the aftermath of Nyiramongi's marriage to Gahindiro, she also fell out of favor with her father, who plotted with Rugaju to bring about her political downfall toward the end of Gahindiro's reign. The context of the story has this incident after the birth of Nyiramongi's three sons, Nkoronko, Rwogera, and Nahunguka. They conspired together to tempt Gahindiro with another wife, named Nyiradudu.[60] According to the *Récit*, Rugaju and Gaaga approached Nyiradudu about seducing Gahindiro, in order to exercise some power over him and to plead their case to him. Nyiramongi thwarts their efforts by sharing Gahindiro's bed both day and night. But the story also

[60] Most of my interview partners laughed at this name and thought it might be fake, though they were uniformly unsure of what it might mean, other than just nonsense.

gives Gahindiro agency in this choice, which is rare,.since Gahindiro is regularly portrayed as weak-willed constantly giving into Rugaju or his mother or one of his wives in nearly every story about him. In this comical incident, Gahindiro has gone to Nyiramongi's hut for the night, and the two of them are already in bed together. They hear the approach of Nyiradudu's palanquin and try to stay very quiet, in the hopes that she will think they are not home and will go away. Instead, Nyiradudu bursts in and challenges Nyiramongi, up to the point of calling her a "bitch" and physically attacking her. Gahindiro is put in the position of holding his two wives apart, and calling for guards. He and Nyiramongi flee to another hut, where they stay for several days with guards outside instructed to keep Nyiradudu from entering, using violence if necessary. It is in this context that Nyiramongi convinces Gahindiro to name her son, Rwogera, as his heir. It is in the aftermath of the failure of the Nyiradudu plot that Rugaju allegedly poisoned Gahindiro.

Nyiramongi, then, appears to be the one obstacle to Rugaju's total control of both Gahindiro and the kingdom. She is the one request that Gahindiro will not indulge Rugaju, and her presence at court was a consistent reminder of that failure, as well as of the nagging suspicion that she exercised a power over Gahindiro that Rugaju did not have, despite the countless other favors Gahindiro had done for him. Her apparent luck at escaping attacks on her person probably discouraged Rugaju from attempting to harm her again, especially once she had given birth to three sons.[61] She also quickly developed a

[61] Because of ritual considerations, a son could only be in the running to become heir if he were not the firstborn son of a particular queen. See Kagame, *Socio-familiales*.

reputation for ruthless vengeance upon her ascension to the throne, or as "mistress of the drum."[62]

It is plausible that toward the end of Gahindiro's reign, his relationship with Rugaju had become strained. Rugaju, the *de facto* leader of the country, ruled as an "autocrat."[63] His reign, which is treated as a joint-rulership by some scholars and storytellers,[64] was responsible for some of the most important innovations of the nineteenth century, and had a lasting impact on the socio-political landscape that would be felt well into the twentieth century. In this regard, he could affect the kind of changes that Nyiramongi could scarcely dream of.

Rugaju, "The Master of All Rwanda"[65]

The common theme throughout the oral traditions relating to Rugaju is the profound extent to which he made enemies among the central court elite. His strategy appears to have been to isolate Gahindiro as much as possible, making his own voice the only one the latter heard, or at least the only one that mattered. Because of Gahindiro's predisposition toward Rugaju, both intimately and because of his hope that his *umutoni* could help subvert the power of the great families, Rugaju was more successful than he might have been in other contexts. The result of this was continuous conflict between Rugaju and other elites, often related to land and cattle.

[62] Vansina collection, Rwogera file, H, 1. For further explication, see chapter 3.
[63] Vansina, *Antecedents*, 149.
[64] Alison Liebhafsky Des Forges, "Two Thunders Cannot Share One Cloud: Joint Rulership in Nineteenth Century Rwanda," Presented at the 19th annual meeting of the African Studies Association, Boston, 1976.
[65] Vansina collection, Gahindiro file, T, 9.

The single most important innovation of Rugaju's reign was the reserved herding domain, sometimes referred to as "*igikingi*."[66] The obsession with cattle as a form of wealth has led to irresponsible oversimplifications,[67] as well as to the obscuring of other important markers of status. Claudine Vidal refers to this as "*le fétichisme de la vache*."[68] Vidal's critique is that by focusing only on cows, rather than that seizures like *ibikingi* (singular of "*igikingi*") had ramifications for land ownership and the power of regional lineages, scholars neglected to appreciate the significance of such land seizures for the spread of court authority. As Vansina rightly points out, *ibikingi* was not the only form of land seizure, and it became less prevalent outside of Nduga. *Ubukonde*, practiced most heavily in what is present-day northern Rwanda, gave land rights to those lineages that were the first to use the land for production.[69] This allowed them to form client relationships with locals who wanted to work the land. The lineage then could collect tribute in the form of crops, cattle, or labor.

Ibikingi differed from *ubukonde* in that legitimate ownership of the land was granted not by innovation and working the land, but by the authority of the *mwami* himself. It was Rugaju who was responsible for this innovation.[70] The *mwami* could dispossess people of their land in order to use the land for his own herds. The land could in this way be distributed to clients of the *mwami* for herds he had entrusted to them. This

[66] Vansina does not use this term because it seems ambiguous. See Vansina, Antecedents, 269, n22.
[67] A significant portion of the literature relating to the 1994 genocide is guilty of this. See especially Philip Gourevitch, We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998); and Mahmood Mamdani, When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 2001.
[68] Claudine Vidal, "Le Rwanda des anthropologies ou le fétisschisme de la vache," Cahiers d'études africaines, 35 (1969), 384-401.
[69] Catherine Andre, "Terre Rwandaise: acces, politique et reforme foncières," in *L'Afrique des grands lacs annuaire*, Filip Reyntjens and S. Marysse, eds. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997-98).
[70] C. Newbury, *Cohesion*, 81.

made these individuals direct clients of the *mwami*. They paid tribute to him in the form of honey, crops, or cattle, and also provided labor to support the court. The labor and crops they paid as tribute came from clients they allowed on the land.

The precedent set by the institution of *ibikingi* made it so *de facto* all of the land in Rwanda was really the property of the *mwami*. It also served to further concentrate the already scarce grazing land into the hands of the most powerful herding families, making it almost impossible for modest herders, like Nyiramongi's father Gaaga or Rugaju's own family, to keep their cattle. These herders could no longer use land that they had used for generations without becoming the clients of those who held the most favor at court. This had the dual effect of strengthening the power of the central court throughout the areas where *ibikingi* was practiced (and the practice spread over the course of the nineteenth century),[71] as well as further consolidating wealth into the hands of a few powerful lineages. Over the next generation, this process of consolidation would lead to the upward redistribution of wealth, as well as to a growing crisis among the ever-increasing peasant population, who were faced with the challenge of finding land on which to grow enough food to feed their families. Combined with new and more oppressive forms of clientship created in the intervening decades,[72] it is little wonder that the 1880s and 1890s saw an upswing in the number of peasant revolts against the encroaching power of the central court.

Rugaju had arguably the most impact on the increasing centralization of the Rwandan kingdom of anyone other than Rwabugiri, who would come to power a few

[71] For the use of ibikingi to magnify court power in Kinyaga, see C. Newbury, *Cohesion*.
[72] For one example, uburetwa, and its impact on political identity among peasants, see M. Catharine Newbury, "'Ubureetwa' and 'Thangata': Catalysts to Peasant Political Consciousness in Rwanda and Malawi," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 14, 1 (1980), 97-111.

decades after Rugaju's death in YEAR. In the process of this centralization, Rugaju made enemies of most of the people with whom he came into contact. His reign was one in which many, including elites, lost land, power, and status within the kingdom. It was widely understood that his power surpassed that of the king, and people seemed disinclined to identify his excesses with Gahindiro.[73] Gahindiro's death, popularly thought to be the work of Rugaju, left many questions, particularly regarding Rugaju's status. Nyiramongi and her son Rwogera were enthroned peacefully and without incident, but there remained the problem of what to do about Rugaju, who had amassed immense power and wealth. Nyiramongi, of course, had no intention of allowing his rule to continue. Yet removing him from power would be a delicate operation, if she did not want to throw the kingdom into chaos.

Rugaju's fall is one of the more popular stories in the oral traditions about this period, and given that the stories are generally gleeful in tone regarding his travails and death, further cements the notion that his rule was extremely unpopular. There are perhaps a dozen different versions of how his plot to poison Gahindiro was uncovered. Kagame's version of the rise and fall of Rugaju is notable not only for what it includes, but for what it leaves out. At no point in his account of Rugaju's fall from grace does he mention Nyiramongi, except to say that one of his wives was "the sister of the Queen Mother."[74] He never includes Nyiramongi's name in relation to Rugaju. This omission is even more conspicuous when one considers that Vansina cites Kagame's *Abrégé* as one of his main sources, specifically in relation to this story. Kagame's *L'Histoire des Armées-bovines dans l'ancien Rwanda* is as silent on Nyiramongi's role in Rugaju's

[73] Vansina collection, Gahindiro file, T, 13, 28.
[74] Kagame, *Abrégé*, T. 1, no. 326.

downfall as *Abrégé*. Of Rugaju, Kagame remarks that, as the *grand favori* of Gahindiro, he "dictated his will on the entire country" but was brought down upon the ascension of Rwogera.[75] He does not mention Nyiramongi's regency, nor her personal conflicts with Rugaju.

It is not even clear that Rugaju did actually poison Gahindiro, or rather had him poisoned, since none of the accounts claim that Rugaju did the deed himself. Some state that Rugaju's father Mutimbo counseled him to murder Gahindiro.[76] Others note sorcery was used in order to plant evil thoughts in Rugaju's mind.[77] In one version, as soon as Rwogera was named as heir, Nyiramongi had Rugaju killed by one of her clients to ensure that he would not interfere, with no mention whatsoever of poisoning.[78] The overwhelming impression from the oral traditions, including those in Kagame and Coupez and Kamanzi, is that Rugaju was, in fact, responsible for the death of Gahindiro. He was not immediately accused, however, which is perhaps a reason for the lingering doubt.

Instead, Rugaju saw to it that Rwogera and Nyiramongi were safely enthroned, and then carried on about the business of running the country. However, by this time Nyiramongi had established a substantial and powerful political network, and most of her clients were opposed to Rugaju's continued rule. Ostensibly they had put up with him only because of Gahindiro. But now that Nyiramongi was *umugabekazi* and they had appropriate political cover, they took advantage of the opportunity. Nyiramongi's faction

[75] Alexis Kagame, *Armées-bovines*, 23.
[76] Vansina collection, Rwogera file, H, 24; also, Gahindiro file, T. 15.
[77] Vansina collection, Rwogera file, H, 24.
[78] Vansina collection, Gahindiro file, T, 3.

shored up its power during the first year or two of her reign, and once it was clear that her rule was stable, Rugaju's downfall came quickly and decisively.

It was Marara, according to Kagame, in collaboration with another of Rugaju's enemies, a man named Kabega, who formally accused him of poisoning Gahindiro. There is almost no information about the way in which these charges were handled, or if there was a formal trial. At this point, the only concrete fact is that Rugaju and most of his family were dead within a few weeks, though one of his sons seems to have been allowed to live in order to attend to Rugaju's shrine.[79] In a few accounts, Rugaju actually commits suicide in order to deprive his political enemies of the chance to torture him, which would most assuredly have been a part of his execution. Torture was a required part of such executions, in which the family of the victim had to take vengeance on the guilty party. Vansina writes, "when family members succeeded at capturing the culprit or a member of his family, it was proper to torture them in front of the shrine that commemorated their ancestor. The crueler the torture inflicted, the better the deceased was avenged."[80] This would most certainly apply in the case of a murdered *mwami*, the intercessor between the kingdom and the divine.

In any case, Rugaju and his family were out of the picture by 1847, and Nyiramongi could then redistribute his fabulous wealth among her favorites. Her final victory over Rugaju was that it was his death and the spoils she inherited that allowed her to stabilize her rule, and bring the kingdom squarely under her thumb, from which not even her son could pry it.

[79] Coupez and Kamanzi, *Récits*, 312-7.
[80] Vansina, *Antecedents*, 186.

The Nkusi Problem: Rugaju's Last Laugh?

Nyiramongi ascended as sole ruler in 1847, and remained as such until her son Rwogera came of age in 1855. She had succeeded in keeping the favor of her husband until his death, and in getting him to name her son as heir, and therefore handing her the power as queen mother. But there are lingering doubts as to whether her victory was really as complete as it seemed. Gahindiro was never known to be particularly politically savvy; he usually left the politicking to Rugaju. However, one of Gahindiro's decrees in his final years was to take an unprecedented step that undermined Nyiramongi and her son, as well as presenting the opportunity to weaken the ruling Nyiginya clan.

Each clan in Rwanda had a family head, or what Kagame calls a "*chef de famille*." This was a man who made the most important decisions for the family, controlled a large portion of its land and cattle, was in charge of marriage arrangements, and was supposed to be in control of other family members. For the Nyiginya clan, the *chef de famille* was always the *mwami*, because a rival family head could create dynastic conflicts that would threaten the stability of the monarchy and the kingdom as a whole. There is only one recorded incident in which the *mwami* was not the head of the Nyiginya family, and that was in the case of Rwogera, Gahindiro's son. Rwogera became *mwami* in 1855, but his half-brother, Nkusi, was named as family head. This aberration is not prominent in the oral traditions, and only receives analytical attention from Kagame and Des Forges.

According to Kagame, when Gahindiro died, he made a point of naming Rwogera his heir—and therefore naming Nyiramongi as *umugabekazi*—but he appointed his other son Nkusi as the head of the Nyiginya clan.[81] Des Forges argues that his actions suggest Gahindiro's unease with Rwogera or perhaps, with Nyiramongi.[82] But perhaps it was not Gahindiro's unease that mattered, but rather Rugaju's. Nyiramongi was ambitious, and Gahindiro clearly indulged her. She wanted to be named *umugabekazi*, and made it so. But because Nkusi was named family head, it appears that her influence over Gahindiro was not as strong as she assumed.

Nkusi was the son of Gahindiro's wife Nyirakimana. She created an army called Abatananirwa, "The Tireless," which was stationed in Buhoro, now part of central Rwanda.[83] While she appears to have been capable and well-connected, perhaps even marrying Rwakagara after the death of Gahindiro,[84] she is not mentioned in any genealogy of the Ega. This could be a possible motive for Gahindiro's naming Nkusi as the head of the family.

Alternatively, it may suggest his reluctance or inability to name Nkusi as his heir for some other reason, especially given that Nkusi was of age when Gahindiro died, in contrast to the child Rwogera. Gahindiro may have also been under pressure to name Rwogera his successor because Nyiramongi's lineage, the Abagereka of the Ega clan, were the most powerful family in the kingdom apart from the Nyiginya themselves, and having one of their own named *umugabekazi* was key to their continued rise. It is also

[81] Alexis Kagame, *Socio-familiales*, 93.
[82] Des Forges, "Two Thunders Cannot Share One Cloud."
[83] Kagame, *Armées-bovines*, 96.
[84] Kagame, *Milices*, 300.

possible that Nyirakimana did not belong to a matridynastic lineage, and therefore her son could not be named heir.

There is a strong likelihood that Rugaju was behind this decision as a way to frustrate the ambitions of the Ega, and of Nyiramongi, perhaps in the hopes that by destabilizing both the Ega and Nyiginya, he would have the opportunity to maintain his hold on power. If this was indeed his gamble, he lost. Nyiramongi's reign as *umugabekazi* was historic because of her political innovations, as well as its longevity. Her power, Des Forges argues, was the apex of Ega political influence. And the monarchy, of course, did not crumble. This parting shot of Rugaju's was yet another reminder of the immense struggle Nyiramongi faced in order to achieve and hold onto power, and she did not suffer anyone to threaten her in this way again.

Conclusion

Nyiramongi and Rugaju both represent avenues to power, which were only available because of a particular type of socially-sanctioned intimate relationship. Marriage to the *mwami* was one path available to women. How far that could take them depended on a variety of other factors. The major privileges of this type of intimate power were available only to women from matridynastic clans, and specifically those who bore more than one son. Nyiramongi was able to amass the power she did in some ways because of biological luck.

Nyiramongi's influence was more than that. When presented with these opportunities, she capitalized on them, using her brother and other men whose status in

court had been threatened by Rugaju to build a powerful network of clients. This gave her the resources to rival Rugaju, quietly at first, and eventually claim ultimate power for herself. This also made it possible to do what her predecessor Umugabekazi Nyiratunga had never attempted: to rule unabashedly in her own name, and not simply under the auspices of being a regent for her son, or within a particular trope of protective and appropriately passive motherhood. Nyiramongi's particular brand of elite female power would prove attractive for the *abagabekaz*i who came after her, though only one, Kanjogera, was ultimately successful.

Rugaju's position was in some ways more challenging. He did not have an official relationship with Gahindiro that held the same weight or ritual significance as marriage. He did, however, have the benefits borne of a lifetime of intimate friendship. Thus, he wielded a kind of influence Nyiramongi could never aspire to. In the end, though, his situation was more precarious because he relied solely on the individual patronage of Gahindiro. If Rugaju killed Gahindiro, then his own arrogance was responsible for his downfall. If he did not, then Gahindiro's death and Rugaju's reputation for ruthlessness had provided Nyiramongi with precisely the public justification she needed to become the most powerful *umugabekazi* of the nineteenth century, and to irrevocably alter the basis of legitimacy on which the monarchy rested.

Chapter 3

Mommy Issues: Matricide and Regicide in the Reigns of Nyiramongi and Murorunkwere, 1865-1877

Umugabekazi Nyiramavugo II Nyiramongi's reign (1845-1867) tested the limits of the power of the *umugabekazi*. Her *akazu* (literally "little house," but used to describe a political network) grew into the most formidable political and military network after her triumph over Rugaju in 1847, and she embarked upon a revenge campaign against all those who had wronged her in her life. This earned the ire of her son, Mwami Mutara II Rwogera (r. 1845-1867), who spent his reign in near-constant struggle with his mother, including at least three (failed) attempts on her life. He died in 1867 of tuberculosis, bitterly cursing her.

Nyirakigeli IV Murorunkwere (r. 1867-1875) became *umugabekazi* largely because of Rwogera's desire to deny his mother's Abakagara lineage of the Ega clan any more access to power. Murorunkwere was from the Kono clan, which had historically been one of the weaker *ibibanda* (matridynastic clans), owing to some missteps during the reign of Mwami Yuhi III Mazimpaka (r. c. 1735-1765). Murorunkwere had a young son named Sebizoni (sometimes spelled "Sezizoni"), who Rwogera chose as his heir before his death. Their successful ascension to power was overseen by Nyiramongi's brother, Rwakagara, who perceived of this as an opportunity to amass more power by controlling a weak lineage than by promoting a woman of his own. But this alliance was short-lived, as Murorunkwere set her sights on exercising full power during her regency, which eventually involved the attempted elimination of the Abakagara. In stepping outside the boundaries imposed by ritual and social expectations for *abagabekazi*—

including allegedly taking a lover and elevating him to high status within her *akazu*—she ultimately made herself a target for her son, who reached his majority in 1873 and renamed himself Rwabugiri.

Both Nyiramongi and Murorunkwere were infamously ambitious, and willing to push the boundaries of their power in order to advance their own careers and those of their loyal clients. But both of them ultimately failed to truly recreate the role of the *umugabekazi*. They were both constrained by expectations of motherhood, and by sons whom they had alienated during their long regencies. In the end, both were murdered for standing in the way of others' ambitions: Nyiramongi for threatening her brother Rwakagara's, and Murorunkwere for her son, Mwami Kigeli IV Rwabugiri (r. 1867-1895), who would become Rwanda's most famous, and infamous, *mwami*.

Though the regicide of *abagabekazi* is not necessarily uncommon in Rwandan monarchical history, two consecutive murders is noteworthy. The murders of Nyiramongi and Murorunkwere present excellent opportunities to analyze the intersections of monarchical power, motherhood, and the limits of elite women's political power in Rwanda. In doing so, we may also examine long-standing mythological tropes applied to elite women in power, and how these were used to police these women's actions, and as a warning to those who would come after. Further, by focusing on the deaths of these two *abagabekazi*, we are able to ask better questions about the evolving nature of political authority in the nineteenth century, as well as the tension between clanship, monarchy, and elite women's agency.

Nyiramavugo II Nyiramongi in Power (1847-1867)

After Rugaju's execution in 1847, Nyiramongi's power was unchallenged, at least for a few years. One of her first tasks was to reward those who had assisted her rise, and to brutally punish those who had wronged her. Her *akazu* benefitted tremendously from her ascension, acquiring more wealth and power, though infighting and Rwogera's hatred of his mother deprived her of both Marara and Nyarwaya of Mbabyayingabo within a few years of Rwogera reaching his majority. Her brother Rwakagara fared better, and not only remained in Nyiramongi's good graces, but also built up his own faction, including Rwogera's brothers Nkusi and Nkoronko. Nyiramongi's vengeance against her enemies was notorious throughout the kingdom, and stories of her reign highlight her cruelty. The most detailed of these stories comes from the *Récit de Nyiramavugo,* the same narrative that explains the possible origins of the rift between Nyiramongi and Rugaju.[1] As this is the most detailed account of her life story, it is appropriate to return to it here.

Jean Mugina's version of this story is the one recorded by Vansina; similar accounts do not appear in Kagame's work, not in Kayijuka's account. Nonetheless, taken in context with these other storytellers' narratives of Nyiramongi, the *Récit* portrays Nyiramongi in a consistent light: as a tumultuous and vengeful woman, unafraid to use her power to punish anyone she perceived as an enemy. Mugina paints a picture of Nyiramongi as a poor and marginalized girl, tending to a cow giving birth on the banks of the Nyabarongo. According to the story, Nyiramongi put the calf in the shade of some trees on the property of a man named Kabaanwa. Kabaanwa's older wife raged at

[1] The Jan Vansina Collection Ibitéekerezo: Historical Narratives from Rwanda : A Collection of Texts and Translations, 1957-1961 (Chicago: CRL-CAMP Dept. of Photoduplication, University of Chicago Library, 1973), Rwogera, H, 1.

Nyiramongi for coming onto her property, and began beating her, throwing her onto the ground. Kabaanwa himself came out and continued the beating, causing Nyiramongi's belt and skin to come off. At this point, Kabaanwa's second wife and son ran out, and restrained Kabaanwa from kicking Nyiramongi. The son yelled for Nyiramongi to run away, and she did. It is after this that she married Gahindiro and became *umwamikazi* (queen).[2]

The story continues years later, when Nyiramongi is *umugabekazi*. Many people began to ask for her favor, and one of these people was the same Kabaanwa who had beaten her when she was a girl. Mugina details how Kabaanwa went to Nyiramongi's brother, Rwakagara, and brought him honey wine and a milk cow as tribute, and to ask that he request Nyiramongi's protection for Kabaanwa and his family.[3] Rwakagara reassured Kabaanwa that, by becoming *umugabekazi*, Nyiramongi has transcended her former self. "The drum protects; it does not take revenge."[4] In Rwandan monarchical cosmology, by becoming *mwami* or *umugabekazi*, the person becomes more than a mere mortal; he or she is no longer *mututsi* (literally, a Tutsi, singular), but the embodiment of the connection between *Imaana* (the heavens) and the Rwandan people and their land.

This section of the story is notable because usually it is only the *mwami* who is described in such a way. For example, popular poetry of the time describes the *mwami* is

[2] Vansina collection, Rwogera, T, 1.
[3] Given the period of time in which this supposedly took place, and evidence from the story that places Kabaanwa's compound in what is today northern Burundi, it is likely that Kabaanwa sought protection from incursions by Barundi armies. For more, see Alexis Kagame, *Un abrégé de l'ethno-histoire du Rwanda, T. 1* (Butare, Rwanda: Editions universitaires du Rwanda, 1972), 186; also, Vansina collection, Rwogera file, H, 14 and 29.
[4] Vansina collection, Rwogera, T, 1.

"not a person."[5] Nyiramongi is the first example in the oral sources to be described in similar language. Because this story was recorded almost a century after her death, this might be a later embellishment designed to add flourish to her story. But it is important, because it indicates her status among *abagabekazi*. Previous women who served in the post kept to their own responsibilities. Because of her long regency (at least a decade), Nyiramongi amassed far more power than most of her predecessors, including her kinswoman Umugabekazi Nyiratunga. Nyiramongi also did not relinquish power to her son, Rwogera, when he came of age. Instead, his reign was marked by continuous conflict with his mother, who almost always outmaneuvered him. This story reflects this reality, that in many ways, Nyiramongi performed the functions of the *mwami*, even going so far as to assume his supernatural "otherness." I will discuss the implications of this below.

Mugina's story continues, explaining that Rwakagara ensured that Nyiramongi heard of Kabaanwa's tribute. Kabaanwa was invited to court by Rwakagara in order to give sacrificial animals on behalf of Nyiramongi. She welcomed him with open arms, and again, Kabaanwa expressed his gratitude and relief. Nyiramongi laughed, so loud it could be heard "all around the palace." She again asserted, "The drum is mistress, and does not take revenge."[6] Again, Nyiramongi herself is cast as possessing the drum, which would be the Kalinga, the drum which signified royal authority and legitimacy. Then she sent Kabaanwa home.

[5] This quote is from a poem recorded by Sipiriyani Rugamba, *La poésie face a l'histoire cas de la poésie dynastique Rwandaise* (Butare, Rwanda: I.N.R.S. (Institut national de recherche scientifique), 1987). For more examples of poetry celebrating the mwami's "otherness," see Alexis Kagame and Pierre Charles, *La poésie dynastique au Rwanda, par Alexis Kagame,... [Préface de Pierre Charles.]* (Bruxelles: G. Van Campenhout, 1951), especially nos. 65-67.
[6] Vansina collection, Rwogera file, T, 1.

No sooner did Kabaanwa arrive home than Nyiramongi sent Rwakagara with his entire army to attack Kabaanwa and arrest him and his entire family. She instructed Rwakagara to leave two guards at the house, to ensure that nothing--not even the smallest jar—was moved from its place. Meanwhile, Kabaanwa and his family were brought to court to face Nyiramongi. When the family was brought before her, she laughed heartily and asked him about his ill demeanor, saying that she brought him back to court because "I love you so, and I can't stand you being so far away from me."[7] She humiliated his daughter by stripping her in front of the court. She then asked Kabaanwa who is his favorite child. He refused to choose, cowering before her. She slapped another child, and pushed down the first wife—the one who had started beating her—causing her to cut her head and bleed.

Nyiramongi then ordered Rwakagara and Marara to take the family out and made them dig holes on a certain hill, and sharpen bamboo spikes. Kabaanwa, his first wife, and one son and daughter were impaled on the spikes, and left buried in the holes that they dug on the hill. When she returned from witnessing this, Nyiramongi sat down on her stool, and "sighed from exhaustion."[8] She then had Kabaanwa's son and second wife, the ones who had protected her, brought before her. She gave them cows as consolation for their executed family members, and extended them amnesty for the sins of their family. She ordered them to marry, for at least one year, and to govern Gisaanze (currently in the northern part of Burundi) as her envoys. She instructed the wife to tell

[7] *Ibid*.
[8] *Ibid*.

her if she was not happy after a year, and if she was not, Nyiramongi would give the wife another husband.[9]

In this account of her rule, Nyiramongi is not a just ruler. She does not simply mete out a penalty for the abuse of a child, nor does she assume the mythological role of an *umugabekazi* who has transcended her humanity, her "Tutsiness," despite the rhetorical flourishes. Rather, she uses her position to enact vengeance in a most un-queen-motherly way. Vengeance, of course, has a long and storied place in Rwandan mythology and culture. Nyiramongi took care, in her takedown of Rugaju, to destroy his entire family so that no one would be left to claim a blood debt from Nyiramongi or the Abakagara. But this vengeance was based on the assumption—right or wrong—that Rugaju was a traitor, responsible for the death of Gahindiro. There was no such blame on Kabaanwa and his family. Rather, they had simply made the mistake of mistreating Nyiramongi as a girl.

What is even more notable about this story is the way it portrays Nyiramongi as an *umugabekazi* bedecked in the trappings of the office of the *mwami*. Whether or not this was during her actual regency is unclear; there are no specific indications of the age of Rwogera or Nyiramongi, other than that she had clearly ascended the throne, and Gahindiro was dead. But whether or not she was serving as regent, she is lavished not with the descriptions of a noble and generous *umugabekazi*, but the calculating and cruel depiction of a tyrant.

This, in many ways, is the picture consistently painted of Nyiramongi as a ruler. She is always described as tumultuous, conniving, and inappropriately ambitious. A

[9] *Ibid.*

common flourish is to describe her smoking a pipe, which was considered a very masculine activity.[10] Though these traits could be admirable in a *mwami*—Rwabugiri is often praised for such behavior—they were not desirable in an *umugabekazi*.[11]

Kabaanwa was not the only abuser of her childhood that Nyiramongi set out to destroy. After the incident with Kabaanwa's family, Nyiramongi went after Bideenge, who had attacked her in her father's compound. He and his family were banished to somewhere in Congo.[12] Nyiramongi sent him west, throwing a handful of berries at him when he pleaded for assistance, telling him to "eat rats and worms, for a change."[13] She never forgot the cruelty she was shown by the court elite when she was still a young girl living in the rural compound of her father. It was only after she had taken care of these lesser men that she moved against Rugaju. She even took revenge on Nyiradudu, another of Gahindiro's *abmwamikazi* (*umwamikazi*, plural) who had threatened Nyiramongi as a puppet of Rugaju's.[14] These stories, according to the storyteller, "show Nyiramongi's evil heart."[15] That the storytellers emphasize how Nyiramongi immediately used her power as *umugabekazi* to destroy her personal enemies, and repeatedly focus on her betrayal of her position as "mistress of the drum" is telling. The stories about Nyiramongi's reign center much more on her personality than her policies. This is important for two reasons.

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[10] This is not the only time such a description is used to make an umugabekazi seem hyper-masculine; similar stories abound about Nyiramongi's descendant, Kanjogera. Interviews with MW and CK.
[11] Alexis Kagame, *Un abrégé de l'ethno-histoire du Rwanda*, T. 2, (Butare, Rwanda: Editions universitaires du Rwanda, 1972), 13-128; Alison Liebhafsky Des Forges, "Defeat Is the Only Bad News: Rwanda under Musiinga, 1896-1931," PhD Dissertation, (New Haven: Yale University, 1976). David Newbury's new introductory chapter to Des Forges' monograph revises the author's initial assessment of Rwabugiri's reign, but it is Jan Vansina who most forcefully and eloquently argues against the hagiography of Rwabugiri, and instead portrays him as a paranoid and violent king. See Alison Liebhafsky Des Forges, *Defeat Is the Only Bad News: Rwanda under Musinga, 1896 -1931* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), especially Chapter 1; and Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] *Ibid*.
[14] *Ibid*. The Nyiradudu story is a particularly disturbing one. Interview with MW.
[15] *Ibid*.

First, this emphasis on specific anecdotes involving verifiable historical figures indicates that the oral traditions pertaining to Nyiramongi have more basis in actual historical events, and are not apocryphal in the same way as earlier *abagabekazi*—for example Nyiratunga, who doesn't seem to have encountered anyone in her life who was not royal or extremely famous. Second, Nyiramongi's popularity within the historical narratives tells us that the politicking of the *umugabekazi* became more important in this period. There are nearly as many accounts of Nyiramongi's reign as there are of her son's, which is not true of her predecessors.[16] Her closer historical proximity makes a difference here, of course. But for these stories to have survived, they had to be repeated; that storytellers continued Nyiramongi's traditions over a century after her death, and detail her as such a complex figure—she is neither a model woman nor a cautionary tale—speaks to her importance in the conception of Rwandan history by these men.

Over the course of the traditions, as they detail years later into her reign, Nyiramongi becomes exclusively "Nyiramavugo," her regnal name. "Nyiramavugo" is translated most literally as "she who speaks too much."[17] Unlike the other regnal names for *abagabekazi*, Nyiramavugo is not simply a feminine derivative of the *mwami*'s regnal name. For example, the *umugabekazi* for a Yuhi king is "Nyirayuhi," and for a Kigeli is "Nyirakigeli." The *umugabekazi* for a Mutara, however, is Nyiramavugo. Some historians believe this name was applied retroactively after the reign of Nyiramongi. If we take seriously the classification of Gahindiro's reign as a "gate" from mythology to history, then Nyiramongi is the first *umugabekazi* whose existence and personality are

[16] Though I would make the caveat that most of these tales of her reign center not on her, but on other elite figures, such as Nyarwaya, Nkusi, Nkoronko, or other male figures familiar at the Court.
[17] Interviews with KL, MW.

solidly historical. She, therefore, became a model for storytellers, who would apply the personality traits for which she was known to earlier Mutara *abagabekazi*.

There is very little written about the first Nyiramavugo, a Singa woman named Nyirakabogo who served as *umugabekazi* to Mwami Mutara I Semugeshi.[18] Kagame only mentions her burial next to her husband, Mwami Cyirima Rugwe, in the *Abrégé*, and she is only tangentially mentioned in relation to her son in his collection of dynastic poetry. As such, there is little to analyze in terms of how her regnal name came to be.

However, the *umugabekazi* of Ruganzu Ndori may shed some light on the situation. The mythological tales about early *bami* are complex and often contradictory. As I discussed in the Introduction, historians have argued for decades over how historical these narratives are, and how literally they should be read. But one fact is inescapable: the most important figures in all of the oral sources, from poetry to narratives to the rituals themselves, are the *bami*. Though the *umugabekazi* was theoretically a coequal ruler, this simply was not a reality until the nineteenth century when regency became the norm. Up until then, the only *abagabekazi* who were mentioned in any but a passing way were those who were exceptional in some way. This seems to be the case for Mwami Ruganzu Ndori's *umugabekazi*, Nyakanga.

Patterns are often retroactively applied in the Rwandan oral traditions, usually as a way to demonstrate a moral lesson. The tales of the two Nyiraruganzus of the

[18] Vansina contends that Semugeshi, whose aliases include Bicuba and Nsoro Muyenzi, was not actually a historical person, but rather perhaps a mash-up of several kings who may have served consecutively, or even at the same time. He calls the years following the founder Ruganzu Ndoli's rule a "dark age," and thus contends it is possible to consider historical narratives regarding this time as only mythological. Vansina, *Antecedents*, 208. Kagame interprets Semugeshi's reign as historical, and dates it as 1543-1576. See Kagame, *Abrégé, T.1*, nos. 183-197. Vansina's collection of *ibitéekerezo* feature tales from this Semugeshi's reign as well, though they are likely the same stories that comprise Kagame's interpretation. Vansina collection, Semugeshi file, T and H.

mythological Founders period illustrate this trend. Mwami Ruganzu Bwimba was one of these mythological kings.[19] His mother was Umugabekazi Nyiraruganzu I Nyakanga, and she was descended from the Singa clan.[20] Nyakanga's name translates as "she who refuses."[21] She is portrayed as a very ambitious woman, whose ambitions often detracted from the dictates of her son, the *mwami*. In fact, the most famous story about her revolves around how she plotted with her lover to undermine her own son.

A century later, Mwami Ruganzu Ndoli took power after a tumultuous period in the history of the region. His adoptive *umugabekazi*, Nyiraruganzu II Nyabacuzi, was from the Kono clan. She was also known as Nyirarumaga. In demeanor and ambition, she was the opposite of her eponymous predecessor. Styled as an academic, she created the *Intebe y'Abasizi*, or the "Chair of Poets," a council charged with preserving the *ibisigo*, or dynastic poetry. This is the same poetry that became the purview of the Singa clan, and eventually of its most famous scion, Alexis Kagame. She also declined to take any lovers after her husband's death, an act that became mythologized as virtuous and self-sacrificing, and which would become the expected norm for *abagabekazi* who followed her. Thus was the myth of the "virgin mother" born in Nyiginya historical literature.

Abagabekazi ostensibly had access to enormous power; Nyiramongi pushed this past what previous women in her position had dared, and to an extent, she was successful. But as her reign continued and she pursued ever more brazen strategies of consolidating

[19] Kagame portrays him as historical, dating his reign to 1312-1354. Vansina disagrees with this, since Ruganzu Bwimba's reign would have been at least a century prior to Ruganzu Ndoli's. Vansina, *Antecedents*, 207-08.
[20] Léon Delmas, *Généalogies De La Noblesse Du Ruanda: (Les Batutsi)* (Kabgayi: Vicariat apostolique du Ruanda, 1950), 25; also, Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 1*, 57.
[21] Interview with MW.

power into her own hands, she made many enemies. These included not only the *abiru*, but also her son, Rwogera.

Checks and Balances: The Death of Nyiramongi

Nyiramongi did not die easily. Because she'd made many enemies, there were several attempts on her life. As she learned the hard way, only one successful attempt is needed. The killing blow came from a quarter she likely never anticipated: her brother and closest advisor, Rwakagara. The attempts to get her out of the way began early in Rwogera's reign. Nyiramongi assumed the regency after Gahindiro's death, around 1845. She ruled as regent while Rwogera was a child; he reached his majority in around 1855.[22] Everyone assumed that she would follow in the footsteps of her forbear Nyiratunga, and step into the background once Rwogera assumed power in his own right. But Nyiramongi did not. She had learned some lessons from her powerful antecedent, but performing matronly humility was not one of them.

With the enemies of her youth vanquished, Nyiramongi set out to consolidate power through her *akazu* (political network). This often brought her into conflict with her own son. When Rwogera achieved his majority, Nyiramongi had already been regent for about ten years. This was quite enough time for her to develop a reputation for cruelty and vengefulness. A particularly telling story from Kagame illustrates this. Rwogera and

[22] Vansina, *Antecedents*, 213. As Vansina points out, Mugina claims that Rwogera was crowned around the age of 10, meaning that he was born in 1835. See Vansina collection, Rwogera file, H, 25. Though others, including Schumacher (ostensibly based on Kayijuka's accounts) and Kagame, claim that he was older, since they claim he was fifty or sixty years old when he died. See Kagame, Abrégé, 191; and Peter Schumacher, *Ruanda* ((Freiburg: Institut-Anthropos, 1958), 175. I side with Vansina here because if Rwogera were 50 at his death in 1867, he would have been 22 at Gahindiro's death in 1845, and would not have needed a regent. Since the oral literature seems quite clear that Nyiramongi did, in fact, serve as regent, and because there is no evidence that this was for any reason other than that Rwogera was still a child, it stands to reason that the narratives that describe him as younger at his death (probably around thirty-five) are more accurate.

Nyiramongi were holding court one day, and receiving chiefs to the court. An old noble, a man named Nyilamakuza, presented Rwogera with a beautiful cow. He said that it was a custom for nobles from the father's generation to give a cow to the son on the occasion of an exceptional act of bravery, and since he had been a noble under Rwogera's father, Gahindiro, he felt it was his duty to recognize Rwogera in such a way.

Rwogera asked him, "Could you tell me the nature of these outstanding achievements?"

> You lived ten months in the womb of your mother, said Nyilamkuza, despite the incessant clamor in it, yet you have not been contaminated. Then your mother breastfeeds you to your weaning and milk did not in you release all those cries you are still a soft character. This is your share of feats unparalleled.[23]

Nyiramongi was understandably furious at this negative portrayal of her character, particularly as she sat mere feet away from Nyilakamuza. Kagame notes at the end of this scene that this was one of many such scenes he collected during his research, and that comedians and storytellers of the time ran wild with such tales, since they were so humorous. Far from being the courageous girl from earlier narratives (if she ever was), portrayals of Nyiramongi by the end of her reign are extremely unflattering. But beyond just insulting her, stories like the one above imply an even more sinister side to Nyiramongi's personality: namely, that her other sons were more like her, and that it was only Rwogera who had maintained a kind demeanor.

It is borne out elsewhere in the oral literature that Nyiramongi played favorites with her sons, and that she much preferred her youngest, Nkoronko. Nkusi, the oldest, remained faithful to his brother, going so far as to lead his army against those of

[23] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 1*, no. 351. Translation is mine.

Nkoronko and Nyarwaya of Byavu.[24] When Rwogera, with the help of Nkusi, was able to drive Marara, the great general and Nyiramongi's favorite, into exile, she relied even more heavily on her son Nkoronko.

Nyiramongi took other steps to assure her supremacy beyond simply military solutions. She had learned well from both Nyiratunga's and Nyiramuhanda's examples of how potent a symbol the *abiru* could be, and she sought to gain its secrets for herself. She demanded to be initiated, and eventually she was. She also was able to get her brother, Rwakagara, onto the council, whose numbers were now stretched beyond any historical precedent. Further, what Nyiramongi did by allowing herself and Rwakagara to learn the esoteric code violated generations of custom. *Abagabekazi* and *ibibanda*—the matridynastic clans—were forbidden from ever learning the secrets of the *abiru*, along with any of the *mwami*'s brothers. The assumption was that this would concentrate too much power into the hands of the very few, and violate the separation between the political side of kingship, and its ritual aspects. That Nyiramongi was able to do this indicates that the realities of kingship in the Nyiginya kingdom were changing.

Kingship had hitherto been conceived of as a ritual position. The *mwami* himself was a conduit for the supernatural energy of *imana* to manifest itself in the land and the

[24] For whatever reason, there are several men named "Nyarwaya" in this generation of the Nyiginya court. It was a name that signified a warrior's destiny. Literally translated, it means, "great booty-taker." Rose-Marie Mukarutabana, personal communication. This, of course, meant wealth in the form of cattle, taken during raids. The two most important are Nyarwaya of Mbabyayingabo and Nyarwaya of Byavu ("of" here meaning "son of").

Nyarwaya of Mbabyayingabo (Nyarwaya-Nyamutezi) was the son of the ritualist Nyiramuhanda and Mbabyayingabo. He was also a powerful ritualist in his own right, and was probably one of Gahindiro's lovers, though not as prominent as Rugaju. Kayijuka, Peter Schumacher's famous informant, is descended from this Nyarwaya. See Kagame, *Abrégé T. 1*, no. 345, 346, 347; Vansina collection, Rwogera file, T, 7, 9, 13; Vansina, *Antecedents*, 151-53; and Delmas, *Génealogies*, 13-14, 62.

Nyarwaya of Byavu was an army chief and court figure who was loyal to Nyiramongi beginning during her time as queen, and continuing into her reign as umugabekazi. He was married to Shongoka, the daughter of Gahindiro, and also sired a powerful lineage of the Ega clan. He is also sometimes referred to as Nyarwaya-Urutesi. See Kagame, *Abrégé T. 1*, no. 329; and Vansina, *Antecedents*, 148, 151-3.

people. Though he was also in charge of an increasingly-large bureaucracy, especially of armies that attacked and conquered, all of this was still tied into the *mwami*'s most important role, which was to ensure the prosperity of his people. But though the *umugabekazi* had some ritual role to play in the kingdom, her position was simply not conceived in the same way. In fact, if an *umugabekazi* died immediately after taking office, there would be no functional difference in the way the kingdom was run. But by the time Nyiramongi assumed the throne, things had changed. Her regency, the second consecutive one of its kind, was very long. She had not sat idly during her time as *umwamikazi*, but had instead amassed significant political power in her own name: power she did not pass along to her son when he gained his majority. Rwogera's kingdom, then, was really sort of a dual-monarchy: that of a *mwami* and a truly coequal and independent *umugabekazi*. Though the position may have been lauded as such from its origins, it had never truly been so. Nyiramongi's ascension, and very long reign, demonstrated how very complicated and dangerous this could be for the kingdom.

Her longevity had ritual ramifications as well. The most important task of each *mwami* was to complete his part of the Path of the Watering, the overarching ritual that was determined by the cycle kings and their names. The task of the Mutara *mwami* was to move the mummified body of the previous Cyilima *mwami* from its initial resting place at Gaseke, to its permanent resting place in Bwanacyambwe. In this case, Rwogera was supposed to move the corpse of Rujugira. Mutara and Cyilima *bami* were connected because they were both considered to be cattle-kings, as opposed to warrior kings. A *mwami* could only perform this ritual when two prerequisites had been met: first, the

mwami had to have reached what Kagame calls "the age of reason," or his majority.[25] Second, he could only complete his part of the ritual after the death of the *umugabekazi*. It was assumed that the king's mother would die fairly early in his reign, freeing him to complete the ritual, and then live out his days knowing that his most important task had been fulfilled. It should have been this way in the case of Rwogera.

Unfortunately, Rwogera contracted tuberculosis when he was still quite young, and it became apparent by the last few years of his reign that Rwogera would not long survive.[26] Members of the *abiru* approached Nyiramongi, asking her to take her own life to ensure the continued prosperity of the kingdom. She refused. So Rwogera conspired with the rest of the *abiru* (though not Nyiramongi or Rwakagara) to murder Nyiramongi. He sent two different messengers with poisonous drinks for her; in both cases, she forced the messengers to drink the poison, killing them. The second of these messengers was Nyarwaya of Mbabyayingabo. She told him to drink from the cup he brought her. He agreed, but asked for a moment to get his things in order. She allowed it, and Nyarwaya returned to Rwogera to inform him of the situation. Rwogera offered to protect him, but Nyarwaya had promised Nyiramongi, and would not go back on his word. He returned to her house, drank the poison, and died.[27]

Without Nyiramongi's death, Rwogera could not complete the reburial of Mwami Cyilima II Rujugira's body. Rwogera's own health diminished, and he died soon after, around 1867. With his death, Nyiramongi must have believed herself invincible at this point, especially since it seemed that her own *akazu* was intact. But she was very wrong.

[25] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 1*, no. 347.
[26] There is, of course, no exact date for this. Kagame describes matters as becoming crucial after Gisaka was subdued, which Vansina dates to around 1865. See Vansina, *Antecedents*, 155.
[27] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 1*, no. 347.

The power of an *umugabekazi* was completely and exclusively contingent upon her role as a mother. From this motherhood flowed all authority and legitimacy; no other woman in the kingdom could aspire to such power, because no other woman could claim such status. But with this immense privilege—an exceptional privilege—came the reality that, if a woman was not the mother of the king, she had no legitimate claim to power. Nyiramongi's continued presence created too much of a crisis in the monarchy.

Nyiramongi spent her reign as a double-agent: she was not just an (ostensible) advocate for her son, whose position kept hers secure. She was also a champion for her lineage, descended from Makara, through Nyiratunga, and then into herself and Rwakagara. In order to bolster that power, she ensured that Rwogera only married women from her Ega clan as his wives that could potentially become *umugabekazi*.[28] But Nyiramongi underestimated the *mwami*'s faction. Everyone assumed that Rwogera would name his son Nyamwesa as his successor. Rwogera had made Nyamwesa head of several armies over the years, including those that had forced Gisaka into submission in 1865. But unbeknownst to anyone, especially his mother's faction at court, Rwogera had adopted his brother Nkoronko's son, Sebizoni, as his own following Nkoronko's divorce from Murorunkwere.[29] It is unclear why Nkoronko set Murorunkwere aside, but it may have had something to do with the relative weakness of her clan, the Kono. Yet for Rwogera, a weak clan was exactly what he needed. By naming an *umugabekazi* from outside of the Ega, he could foil his mother's plans, and rescue the monarchy from her machinations.

[28] Rwogera ostensibly ritually married women from other clans and lineages for other purposes, but they were ineligible to become *umugabekazi*. For more, see Chapter 2 of this manuscript.
[29] Kagame spells the name "Sezisoni," but Vansina spells it "Sebasoni." The only difference appears to be stylistic.

Once Sebizoni and Murorunkwere had been declared, both Nkoronko and Rwakagara defected from Nyiramongi's faction to Rwogera's. They pledged their support to Murorunkwere, and saw her and her son installed. But their victory could not be complete as long as Nyiramongi lived. Rwakagara, every inch the ruthless politician just like his sister, took care of this last obstacle personally.

> The king had given orders not to announce his death at the residence of his mother. Chief Rwakagara, the only brother of the Queen Mother, went home and killed her by smothering her with milk poured through a funnel inserted by force into the mouth. The esoteric code forbade her to outlive her son.[30]

And so Nyiramongi died.

The Unlikely Ruler: Murorunkwere Ascendant

Unlike Nyiramongi, her successor Murorunkwere's origins are not well known. Her father was Mitari, and they were descended from the same lineage as Mwami Yuhi II Mazimpaka's ill-fated *umugabekazi*, Nyamarembo.[31] She was married to Rwogera's younger brother, Nkoronko, who was Nyiramongi's favorite son. They had a son named Sebizoni, who would eventually rename himself "Rwabugiri," which means, "The Boss." Rwabugiri reached his majority in 1875, which would put his birth around 1855. This would mean that Murorunkwere's and Nkoronko's marriage took place probably around

[30] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 1*, no. 349. The esoteric code may have decreed this, but it does not appear to have been enacted during the reign of Nyiratunga, who lived well into Rwogera's reign.
[31] Both women can be traced back to the lineage of Majinya, who was Nyamarembo's father.

1853. Assuming she was of average marriage age, which was between 18 and 20, she was likely born around 1834.[32]

Murorunkwere's marriage to Nkoronko did not last long; he set her aside after the birth of Sebizoni for reasons that are unclear. They seem to be somehow related to his loyalty to his mother. Murorunkwere's father, Mitari, was part of Rwogera's faction at court, though he was from a relatively unremarkable lineage of the Kono clan. Since Nyiramongi spent a fair amount of energy ensuring the continued rise of her lineage of the Ega clan, Nkoronko's divorce from Murorunkwere may have had something to do with Nyiramongi's politics. But the oral literature does not provide any specific reasons for the split. However, Nkoronko's ill-treatment of his wife and son provided Rwogera with a political opening. He took them in and provided for them, and adopted Sebizoni as his own. While this could initially be construed as merely an act of compassion or brotherly honor, it in fact had profound political ramifications. Nyiramongi had ensured that her son, the *mwami*, married only women from the Ega clan, to assure their power would continue. Thus, any biological sons of Rwogera would also be descended from the Ega clan. But Nyiramongi did not count on adoption as a completely legitimate form of acquiring heirs.

When Rwogera died, his faction was in bitter and open conflict with that of Nyiramongi, especially given his failed attempts to poison her. Because of her continued prosperity, he had not been able to perform his duties in the ritual Path of the Watering,

[32] Age estimates based on both Vansina's estimates in *Antecedents* (see Appendix II), as well as Alexis Kagame, *Les organisations socio-familiales de l'ancien Rwanda* (Brussels, 1954). Helen Codere also has helpful observations on marriage and family practices as they existed in the late monarchical period in her collection of autobiographies from the late colonial period. Helen F. Codere, *The Biography of an African Society: Rwanda 1900-1960 : Based on Forty-Eight Rwandan Autobiographies* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 1973).

and thus the cycle of kingship was threatened. His last act was to name a successor. As was customary, he whispered the name of the heir to the *abiru* on his deathbed. Though most people assumed would name his son Nyamwesa, to whom he had entrusted important armies and herds, Rwogera did not. In one last swipe at his mother, Rwogera named the child Sebizoni as his heir. Choosing Sebizoni was a risk for Rwogera. First, unlike Nyamwesa, Sebizoni was a child. Assuming he was born in 1855, he was only around 12, so his enthronement assured that Murorunkwere would have a long regency, much like Nyiramongi and Nyiratunga before her. As the third in a series of long regencies, Murorunkwere's established a pattern. It is probable, though, that since Murorunkwere was from the Kono clan, rather than the Ega, she was seen as less of a threat to the stability of the monarchy, and especially to the dominance of the Nyiginya. If Rwogera's intention was to thwart the power of the Ega, and especially of Nyiramongi's lineage, he failed miserably, since Murorunkwere's main allies became Nkoronko, Nyiramongi's son, and Rwakagara, Nyiramongi's brother and head of their lineage, now called the Abakagara, or "the people of Rwakagara." Nyiramongi's death, while it ended her own, personal ambitions, did nothing to abate the meteoric rise of her lineage.

The second reason that Rwogera's choice was risky had more to do with the general state of the kingdom. Though both Gahindiro and Rwogera were "cattle-kings" (as was expected of Yuhis and Mutaras), both also oversaw both expansive warfare and fundamental changes to the way the kingdom was structured. Under Gahindiro—through the efforts and innovations of his *umutoni*, Rugaju—large herders began to amass exponentially more power and wealth through the reserved domains. As described in Chapter 2, this consolidated the country's wealth into a smaller and smaller proportion of

the nobility, which left them jockeying for recognition from the *mwami* and *umugabekazi*, who could grant land rights wherever they wanted, and to whomever they wanted.[33] The effects of the reserved domain had serious and long-lasting ramifications for politics, both foreign and domestic. The reserved domain made land a scarce commodity. The interlacustrine region has long been one of the most densely populated areas in the world, and this was compounded in the late nineteenth century by a population boom. The only way the Nyiginya Kingdom could take more land was through conquest, which was bitterly opposed by the smaller kingdoms that surrounded it. The kings of these polities are referred to in the oral literature as *abahinza*, which can be translated as "lords of agriculture," and was used as a mocking term by the Nyiginya, who defined themselves by their status as herders, and elevated this above agricultural pursuits. Over time, identification of these *abahinza* became synonymous with "Hutu," and was twisted even more sinister means during the late colonial and post-colonial periods.

The *abahinza* were not a unified group by any means. They did not throw in their lots together in the face of the menacing Nyiginya conquests. But they fiercely opposed integration into the Nyiginya Kingdom. As David Newbury has persuasively argued, many of the *abahinza* accepted into their kingdoms herders who fled Nyiginya integration in the north and east of what is today Rwanda, and even present-day Western Tanzania and southern Uganda.[34] These herders maintained aspects of their old identities,

[33] This was supposedly the exclusive purview of the *mwami*; however, since successive *abagabekazi* ruled as regents, they were also involved in the allocation of land resources, which helped to solidify their various factions.

[34] These regions were known, respectively, as the Kingdoms of Ndorwa and Karagwe. Karagwe was defeated by the Nyiginya in the late eighteenth century, but conflicts between the Nyiginya and Ndorwa persisted through the nineteenth century and into the early colonial period. For examples, see Alexis Kagame, *L'histoire des armees-bovines dans l'ancien Rwanda* (Brussels: Academie royale des Sciences

but forged new identities in their new societies through trade and intermarriage. The historiography of these frontier regions is extremely important when considering the consolidation and ideological construction of the Nyiginya Kingdom after Cyilima Rujugira's reign in the mid-eighteen century. David Newbury highlights the relationship between the "center"—the seat of Nyiginya power in Nduga—with the "periphery," which is the Kivu Rift and lands to its west, which became known as "Bunyabungo," which Newbury cites as a sort of catch-all term to describe those which Rwandans saw as uncultured barbarians.[35] It was against these "Banyabungo" that Rwandans in the Nyiginya Kingdom defined themselves; the centralization of Rwandan culture—and particularly the culture of the Tutsi elite—was based on opposition to these frontiersmen.[36]

Many of the *abahinza* were conquered by the Nyiginya more than once; *bami* would often subdue a region and set up a residence, but leave it after just a few years, appointing a delegate (often a wife or son). These delegates ruled with differing degrees of efficiency. Some of them effectively co-opted the newly-conquered elites by giving them land and cattle; others were unable to do this, and when they died or left to go back to court, the region would become more or less autonomous once more. But these frontiers also became a site on which Nyiginya identity was forged. Newbury argues that

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d'Outre-Mer, 1961), esp. 45, 71 for armies created using cattle raided from Ndorwa; Kagame and Charles, *La poésie dynastique*, 145-48; Vansina collection, Ndabarasa file, T, 5; and, Christopher Wrigley, *Kingship and State : The Buganda Dynasty* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[35] David Newbury, "Bunyabungo: The Western Frontier in Rwanda, Ca. 1750-1850," in *The Land Beyond the Mists: Essays on Identity and Authority in Precolonial Congo and Rwanda*, David Newbury, ed. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 204-228.

[36] The history of these migrations falls outside the purview of this study. For a fuller exposition of this historiography, see David Newbury, *Kings and Clans: Ijwi Island and the Lake Kivu Rift, 1780-1840* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), especially 92-93 and 105-6; also, G. Pagès, *Au Ruanda sur les bords du Lac Kivu (Congo Belge) : Un royaume hamite au centre de L'afrique* (Bruxelles: G. van Campenhout, 1933), 142, and 598-607; and, *Historique et chronologie du Ruanda*, (Kabgayi.: s.n., 1954), 121-22. Also, see Newbury, "Bunyabungo."

this was not simply a function of the central Court imposing its culture upon the "periphery," but rather a system of cultural exchange, in which ideas of centralization and hierarchy that existed in these Western kingdoms helped to shape Nyiginya notions of power and authority.[37] In this way, the Nyiginya Kingdom was not so different from other models of expansionism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, much of the historiography of the British Empire has developed along themes of discursive exchange between colony and metropole.[38] Though Rwanda's small kingdom clearly differs in many ways from Britain's massive empire, the similarities between the discursive elements of conquest and administration should not be ignored. That both had limited personnel to spare, and in the aftermath of the initial conquest, relied on the cooperation of local elites, whether preexisting or created. Perhaps more importantly, in both cases did newly-conquered territory present opportunities for enterprising young men to make names and fortunes for themselves by currying favor with the ruling elites.

This was especially interesting in the case of the Nyiginya Kingdom, in which social mobility was rare. The fortunes of individuals and families were tied to patronage by elites, and through the reserved domain system, the rich became richer and the poor progressively poorer, while the middle was squeezed out almost entirely. But because the kingdom was expanding so rapidly—particularly once Rwabugiri became *mwami* in 1867—more armies were created. These armies were funded by cattle raided during battles. Once an area had been conquered, armies were stationed there, meaning that while some armies moved around rather a lot, others were stationed on the frontiers for

[37] Newbury, "Bunyabungo," esp. 208. For more on this, see Gillian Mathys, *People on the Move: Frontiers, Borders, Mobility, and History in the Lake Kivu Region*, PhD Dissertation, University of Ghent, 2014.
[38] For example, Durba Ghosh and Dane Keith Kennedy, *Decentring Empire: Britain, India, and the Transcolonial World* (London: Sangam Books, 2006); also Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections : India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

years at a time. These armies form a crucial aspect of the political and social history of the Nyiginya Kingdom. Beginning with Rujugira in the mid-eighteenth century, armies were formed from diverse geographical regions, meaning that what bound them together was not a common or shared history or regional identity, but rather a shared association with the Nyiginya Court, and loyalty to the *mwami*. This was a critical development in the centralization of the Nyiginya Kingdom, because it united these soldiers and warriors around a central identity separate from shared religious traditions, or commodification of cattle.[39]

But Newbury also notes that conquest and expansion in the east—that is, in Ndorwa, Karagwe, Gisaka, and, to a point, Burundi—differed radically from later expansion west. Of Rujugira's wars of conquest, he writes,

> These wars were most often fought against other dynasties associated with Tutsi status. Military consolidation therefore occurred primarily through conflict among similar ("Tutsi") dynasties, not in interethnic conflict; in fact, though military power was important, the later incorporation of western agricultural ("Hutu") regions often took a form different from and more complex than outright military conquest.

In these earlier cases, warfare and conquest solidified the ideological underpinnings of the Nyiginya Kingdom. These other "Tutsi" kingdoms, also organized around the hegemony of pastoralism, only strengthened the identity of the Nyiginya cattle kings. This was not true of the later conquests of Gahindiro's successors, in the aftermath of the reserved domains. The *abahinza* of the north and west reigned over agricultural societies. They were as ideologically and ritually distinct from the Nyiginya as the kingdoms of the east and south were similar.

[39] *Historique et chronologie*, 159-61.

Had Rwogera named Nyamwesa his successor, as all expected him to do, Nyamwesa would likely have looked to his maternal kin for support. The power of the Ega, and particularly the Abakagara would have continued to grow, and the fortunes of the elites would have been secured. Though it is unclear precisely what kind of ruler Nyamwesa may have been, he would have begun that reign as an experienced warrior and diplomat, as well as a man grown. This was not the case with young Sebizoni. While a long regency would have some impact on any sovereign's reign, in this particular case, it appears that Murorunkwere's behavior as a regent shaped her son's worldview, and directly influenced his demeanor as king.

Rwakagara denounced (and killed) Nyiramongi to indicate he had changed allegiances to Rwogera's—now Murorunkwere's—faction. Since she came from a relatively weak family, and her ties to the royal line were diminished because Nkoronko had set her aside, Rwakagara likely felt this was his opportunity to seize power. He perhaps envisioned himself as another Rugaju, able to win the young monarch's trust, and perhaps to supplant Murorunkwere. But two things happened that he did not count on. First, Nkoronko, Rwogera's brother and one-time favorite son of Nyiramongi, defected to Murorunkwere's side, and the two of them reconciled, at least temporarily.[40] This meant that, far from being a pitiable orphan, the child Sebizoni now had both of his parents firmly by his side.[41] Second, Murorunkwere herself proved a formidable force to be reckoned with. The first demonstration of her power came about a year after her

[40] The story goes that she shamed him by blaming him for leaving her and her son to the whims of fate, and blessing his brother, Rwogera, who was noble enough to take pity on them and adopt her son. Vansina collection, Rwogera file, T, 6.

[41] There are a few passages in the oral literature that claim Rwogera was somehow actually the biological father of Sebisoni, but they are so contorted to allow for an encounter between Murorunkwere and Rwogera that they are almost impossible to believe. Since kings regularly adopted children into their households, it is much more likely that Nkoronko was actually Sebizoni's father.

enthronement, when her forces massacred those of a political rival at Rwesero. As I said above, the succession struggle of Sebizoni and Murorunkwere was really a struggle between Nyiramongi's and Rwogera's factions at court. The struggle outlived both of them because their partisans remained, albeit with shifting alliances. Though both Rwakagara and Nkoronko abandoned Nyiramongi's cause and threw in their lots with Murorunkwere and the remainder of Rwogera's faction, some remained loyal to the previous *umugabekazi*, and thus attempted to discredit and undermine Murorunkwere. This included Rugereka, the brother of Nyarwaya of Byavu.

Nyarwaya of Byavu was married to Gahindiro's daughter Shongoka, a figure who appears in the *ibiteékerezo* with shocking regularity, given that she was a woman, and not an *umugabekazi*, nor particularly remarkable in any way.[42] One of the more famous stories about her is how she once let a fire burn out rather than let any of her Tutsi servants tend to it, because carrying firewood and tending the hearth was considered to be a task for Hutu. For this allegiance to Court values, her husband was given charge of the Imvejuru army of his father, Byavu.[43] Nyarwaya had been killed by Rwogera personally as part of the latter's continuous war with his mother.[44] Shongoka had then married his brother, Rugereka, whose lineage of the Ega was the second most important, behind Nyiramongi's. The Abagereka, as they were called, were Nyiramongi's closest allies next

[42] The oral literature is very clear that Shongoka was the daughter of Gahindiro. What is less clear is the identity of her mother. Vansina's collection identifies her mother as a woman named Nyiraburo, a "princess, she was married to a king, she had a daughter who was Shongoka." Vansina collection, Miscellaneous file, H, 62. But Kagame claims Nyiraburo was the daughter of Ndabarasa, married to Byavu, and the mother of Nyarwaya of Byavu, who was Shongoka's husband. Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, no. 369. Vansina also identifies Nyiraburo as Nyarwaya's mother. The earlier source may have referred to Shongoka as Nyiraburo's "daughter" simply because she was her daughter-in-law. Shongoka seems to have been rather close with Nyiramongi, and may have been her daughter. As the genealogies do not include female children, there is little chance of verifying this.

[43] Vansina collection, Miscellaneous file, H, 62. The Imvejuru army had several important chiefs, beginning with Byavu.

[44] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 1*, 210-14; also, Vansina collection, Rwogera file, H, 5, 13, 30.

to her own lineage. After Rwakagara murdered her and joined forces with Murorunkwere and Nkoronko, the Abagereka continued to defy them, and attempted to undermine Murorunkwere.

It took her the better part of a year to consolidate her forces, and to reconcile with both Rwakagara and Nkoronko. She then commanded the armies Inzirabwoba, led by Nkoronko, and Abashakamba, led by his nephew Rwampembwe, to eradicate the Abagereka. Rugereka and his family had their compound in Rwesero, which is next to Nyanza, in the southern part of Nduga. The royal court was in Nyanza at the time, to perform the *Umuganura*, or First Fruits Festival. The death of Rwogera had been decreed murder by poison by the auguries—even though he actually died of tuberculosis—and Murorunkwere used this as pretext for her attack.[45] When Murorunkwere sent her forces, Muvunyi, another son of Byavu who had taken her side, went to warn Rugereka. He and his family chose to stay and fight. According to Kagame, "The battle was fought on the hill Rukali, between Mwima and Rwesero. Warriors of Rugereka were gradually driven back to the top of Rwesero, and finally driven to retreat inside the residence of the master. After a fierce battle, the residence was burned and the rebels who were not killed in combat perished in the flames."[46] Shongoka, who was at another residence to the south, heard of the defeat of her husband, and set her own residence afire and locked herself in to die as he had.[47]

[45] Anytime a *mwami* died younger than he should have, someone was accused of poisoning him. Usually it was a way to conveniently scapegoat any pesky enemies hanging around from the previous reign. This was the exact same pretext Nyiramongi had used to get rid of Rugaju just a few decades earlier.
[46] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2,* 26.
[47] Alexis Kagame, *Les milices du Rwanda precolonial* (Brussels: Academie royale des sciences d'outre-mer, 1963), 95.

The massacre of the Abagereka was a huge victory for Murorunkwere, but one that set a violent tone for her regency, and the reign of her son. Vansina writes of the attack, "It was a hecatomb never to be forgotten."[48] Over 200 of Rugereka's faction—what was left of Nyiramongi's—died at Rwesero in a battle that took half a day. They were all nobles. The rout of Rugereka's forces eradicated almost his entire lineage, but it also set the stage of increasingly brutal massacres of political enemies. Murorunkwere reveled in her newfound power. It would be short-lived enough, as her personal life got in the way of her political ascendancy. Like her predecessor, she had shored up a formidable faction, and for a while, this was sufficient. But she did not learn from the example of Nyiramongi, that she could not keep everyone happy forever, and that eventually, her son's star would eclipse her own.

Illicit Whispers and Broken Taboos: The Death of Murorunkwere

Murorunkwere had everything she wanted by the time her son, Sebizoni, came of age in 1873. Her faction was secure, and the kingdom was prospering. She had reconciled with her ex-husband and father of her child, Nkoronko. She was also relatively young (probably around 40), and seemed to be in for a long and enjoyable reign. But she was an extraordinarily powerful woman living in an anxious patriarchy. We cannot know how Murorunkwere herself perceived her political history: set aside to meet the demands of a domineering and vicious mother-in-law, she had found herself without the security that only a male provider could ensure in the Nyiginya kingdom. Did Rwogera rescue her out of pity and compassion? Or was it the result of careful calculations on her part? There is

[48] Vansina, *Antecedents*, 166.

nothing to suggest the mechanisms of this in the oral literature. But one way or the other, her son was not only adopted by his uncle, but also made heir to the kingdom. Murorunkwere, like Nyiramongi and Nyiratunga before her, created a reputation of herself as a fiercely-devoted mother during her regency, going to great lengths to ensure the throne for her son. But how much of this was truly for Sebizoni, who would become Rwabugiri, and how much for her own political ambitions? We can only speculate.

In one thing, she did follow in her predecessor's footsteps: she sought to strengthen her own lineage and secure their place in the ruling hierarchy. She arranged that Sebizoni, prior to his taking the throne in his own right, married several women from her lineage of the Kono clan. In fact, he married all three daughters of Murorunkwere's brother, Nzirumbanje.[49] Two of the daughters were already married, and thus had to divorce their husbands. One of these, Nyiraburunga, had three sons: Rutarindwa, Baryinyonza, and Karara. Sebizoni married her and adopted her sons. In an act of déjà vu, Rwabugiri would name his adoptive son Rutarindwa as his heir a few years later, eschewing his biological sons, just as Rwogera had done in the previous generation. Murorunkwere also distributed Rugereka's substantial holdings to her family, most of them to her brother, Rutezi. Rutezi became the commander of the Imvejuru army corporation, which was very powerful and brought with it cattle and grazing land. As Vansina notes, the destruction of the Abagereka did weaken the Ega, and strengthen the Kono. But neither of these was sufficient to enact a real shift in the balance of power. Instead, because both were relatively weak, it created a power vacuum into which other

[49] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 28-29.

individuals and families sought to enter, hoping to gain the favor of either Murorunkwere or her son.[50]

Murorunkwere also accompanied her armies into battle when she sent them to fight. After an ill-fated attack on Ndorwa, which threatened to devolve into the Nyiginya armies fighting one another instead of the Ndorwans, she sent her troops to Ijwi Island in Lake Kivu, bringing her court with her. Her armies did not succeed in capturing Ijwi, but they killed an important chief and collaborator, and so declared victory anyway before returning to Nduga.[51] Both of these campaigns gave Murorunkwere a substantial amount of plunder to distribute as she saw fit. As she gradually grew more comfortable in her role, she began to take more risks, and form alliances outside of the faction she had inherited from Rwogera. The standout amongst these was Seruteganya. Unlike the favorites of previous rulers, Seruteganya not only belonged to an unremarkable lineage, but he was actually Hutu. He was the chief tanner for the royal household, and had been celebrated in story and song during Rwogera's reign.[52] While the origins of this alliance are sketchy, it seems quite clear that they were more than cronies: they were lovers.

I have previously discussed the abundance of literature relating to the dalliances of the *bami* and other noblemen. Both same-sex and different-sex pairings were quite common, and virtually no one batted an eye at these liaisons, so long as the *mwami* had heirs to secure the succession of the throne. This was absolutely not the case for *abagabekazi*, however. Old and entrenched tropes of appropriate motherhood had developed long before Murorunkwere's time, and these governed the expectations for

[50] Vansina, *Antecedents*, 167.
[51] Rwabugiri would attempt to conquer Ijwi a few more times, and almost succeeded. He did not, however, capture the drum that signified kingship on the island, and therefore was never recognized as the legitimate ruler. See David Newbury, "Rwabugiri and Ijwi," *Etudes d'histoire africaine* 7 (1975), 155-173.
[52] Kagame, *Armées-bovines*, 41-42; also, Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 30.

abagabekazi. One need only look to the stories of Nyakanga, "she who refuses," the *umugabekazi* to Ruganzu Bwimba for an example. Kagame's story of the foundations of Rwanda begins with Ruganzu Bwimba, whose reign he dates to 1312-1354.[53] In the story, Bwimba is trying to deal with the hostile kingdoms of Bugesera and Gisaka, both of which lie in the southeast of present-day Rwanda. Bugesera will eventually make peace with Rwanda, but Kimenyi I Musaya, the king of Gisaka, wants to annex the Nyiginya Kingdom. On the advice of his counselors, Bwimba refuses to let Musaya marry Robwa, his sister. There is a prophecy that Robwa's child would help Gisaka annex the Nyiginya Kingdom. However, Umugabekazi Nyiraruganzu I Nyakanga, and her consort, Nkurukumbi, support the marriage, ostensibly for diplomatic purposes.

Nyakanga's opinion wins out in this scenario, and Robwa marries Musaya. Though Robwa promises her brother she will not conceive a child to destroy Rwanda, in time she becomes pregnant, and sends her brother a message to tell him. Bwimba and his advisors believe that only a liberator—a *mutabazi*—can save the country now, by sacrificing himself for the kingdom. Nkurukumbi, Nyakanga's consort, is chosen for this sacrifice. This seems like poetic justice, since it is Nyakanga's bad advice which led to this scenario in the first place. But Nyakanga refuses to let Nkurukumbi go, and says she will not sacrifice her lover.

Bwimba and his advisors curse Nyakanga, and decree from this point, no woman from the Singa clan can ever again hold the office of *umugabekazi*. Robwa, seeing the ramifications of her pregnancy, tells her brother she will commit suicide before the child

[53] As explained above, I concur with Vansina's assessment that this reign is mythological rather than historical; I include regnal dates here simply to place the reign within Kagame's conception of dynastic history. Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 1*, 57.

is born, so that her son will not overthrow the kingdom. Bwimba, heartbroken, decides that the only way to save both his sister and the kingdom is to sacrifice himself as a *mutabazi*, a liberator who sacrifices himself for the kingdom. His wife, Nyakiyaga, is pregnant; he goes to the eastern border with Gisaka, and awaits word that she has delivered a son. When he hears the news, he sends orders that the child should be named Rugwe, and goes into battle. He is killed by Gisakan warriors. When his drum is taken back to Musaya and presented to Robwa to name her the future *umugabekazi* of the unified kingdoms, she "rushed against the edge of the drum, killing the unborn child in her womb."[54] Both Robwa and Bwimba and celebrated together as *abatabazi*, because their actions prevented the Nyiginya Kingdom from being overthrown by Gisaka.

While the story can be told for its patriotic purposes—sacrifice for the good of the nation—there is also an important lesson here for subsequent *abagabekazi*. Nyakanga acted against the best interests not only of her son, but of the kingdom, because of her relationship with Nkurukumbi. Her own son, the *mwami*, as well as her daughter had to sacrifice their lives, because she was not willing to sacrifice the life of her lover. Further, for Nkurukumbi himself, he is remembered not as a courageous liberator, but as a coward, hiding behind the skirts of his dominating matron. In the interest of maintaining stability, and keeping the best interests of the kingdom and its ruler, *abagabekazi* were not supposed to take lovers. Following in the footsteps of Cyilima Rugwe's adopted *umugabekazi*, female monarchs were to eschew this type of pleasure, and instead devote themselves to cultural renewal and patronage, as well as supporting their sons.

[54] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 1,* 59.

The taboo against *abagabekazi* taking lovers had another, more practical reason: many of these women, particularly in the nineteenth century, assumed the throne at a rather young age. They had all proven themselves fertile. Ostensibly, most of them were still within childbearing years. A son born to a sitting *umugabekazi*, particularly one acting as regent, could present a real and viable threat to the sitting *mwami*. This was a particularly salient fear in light of the continual conflict between Nyiramongi and Rwogera. Murorunkwere did not respect this taboo. She took Seruteganya as a lover, and the two of them schemed and plotted their way to increased power and wealth. Though their relationship seems to have been common knowledge, it was not popular, particularly when Murorunkwere showed favor to Seruteganya over other potential favorites at court. In one such instance, after obtaining a great deal of cattle from her war with Ndorwa, Murorunkwere refused to give any herds to Nkoronko, awarding them instead to Seruteganya.[55] In another, Murorunkwere received a gift of *inyambo*, the famous cattle with long horns so prized by the Tutsi nobility. Nkoronko petitioned to be given some of these cattle, but Murorunkwere refused, giving them to Seruteganya. After this slight, Nkoronko sought revenge.[56]

While she flouted this taboo, Murorunkwere may have gotten away with her indiscretions for a while, had it not been for a rumor that she was pregnant with his child. This was more than the court could abide. Nkoronko and others demanded an end to this, and went to Rwabugiri, now an adult and *mwami* in his own right, to demand something be done about Seruteganya. It is important to note here that each individual involved in this story has unique motivations, and sometimes multiple motivations. Murorunkwere

[55] Vansina collection, Rwabugiri file, T, 1.
[56] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 30.

was certainly motivated by her political ambitions. But she also seems to have had genuine affection for and attraction to Seruteganya; it is unlikely that simply desiring a helpful political ally would have led her to someone as relatively weak as Seruteganya. Far from being an asset to her, she was a boon to his political fortunes, rather than the other way around. Seruteganya likewise probably harbored affectionate feelings toward Murorunkwere (though we have absolutely nothing in the oral literature that speaks to his agency in the affair); she also raised him from the rank of an artisan-servant to a major player in the Nyiginya Court, and lavished wealth upon him. Nkoronko opposed Murorunkwere's dalliance with Seruteganya. He, like other men at court, likely felt that this threatened the stability of the *mwami*, whom he not only served, but who was also his biological son. Murorunkwere had also blatantly distributed wealth that he felt belonged to him to Seruteganya, which Nkoronko felt deprived him of increased status and prestige at court. But Murorunkwere was also his ex-wife. While they had reconciled in order to work together for the good of their son and the kingdom (not to mention their own advantages), there does not seem to be any love lost between them. Though Nkoronko had initially set Murorunkwere aside, it seems reasonable to think that he may have had lingering feelings of jealous over how well she had done for herself since he left her, especially since she now held a position of power over him.

Rwabugiri—the former Sebizoni—is more complicated. Though the oral literature is full of tales of his seemingly gleeful violence and paranoia, it is unclear whether this was his personality prior to the death of his mother. Whatever he may have become, he was still quite young when he assumed his full power around the age of 20, in 1873. Murorunkwere had not moved against him in any way; while she was quite powerful, at this point everything she had done had benefited him. When he received

word of her alleged pregnancy and affair with Seruteganya, his reaction was not particularly strong. Rwabugiri heard the rumor that Murorunkwere was pregnant with Seruteganya's child, likely from Nkoronko. He did not confront his mother about this, but rather questioned his Kono wives, the daughters of Nzirumbanje, brother of Murorunkwere. When he called them to him, he asked them if they had heard such a thing, and if it was true, saying that he was sure they would know, since they were as close as sisters to her, coming from the same father's father, and father's mother.[57] His wives refused to answer his questions directly, instead giving him evasive answers, and making him even more sure that the rumors were true, and that his mother really was pregnant with Seruteganya's child.

According to Kagame, Rwabugiri took his court to wait on the banks of the Nyabarongo. Murorunkwere was unsure why they had gone there to wait, but followed her son there, and set up camp on the opposite shore, along with Seruteganya. Rwabugiri sent Nkoronko, Rwampembwe, and another son of Rwakagara to assassinate Seruteganya and bring his mother to him. In Kagame's story, Murorunkwere was killed during the fight (along with Seruteganya), and it is later proven that Murorunkwere was not, in fact, pregnant. But Vansina's sources point to something much more sinister: that Rwabugiri himself committed matricide. In this version of the story, Rwabugiri stormed into his mother's house, where she was talking with Seruteganya, and he stabbed her with a sword, which mortally wounded her. Yet she still had time to rebuke him for his actions, protesting her innocence before finally drinking poison to die quickly. Rwabugiri also killed Seruteganya in this story. Murorunkwere's servants, however, proclaimed her

[57] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 30.

innocence, and exclaimed that Rwabugiri had been wrong the whole time, that there was never any adultery.[58]

It is unclear what actually happened to cause Murorunkwere's death, or whether or not Rwabugiri wielded the sword himself. Both stories seem completely plausible in light of the circumstances, though the scene of Murorunkwere drinking poison from Vansina's source sounds a bit apocryphal, since that was always the trumped-up charge against a political enemy who needed to be quickly dealt with. Still, in the end, Murorunkwere and Seruteganya were both killed, and whether by Rwabugiri's own hand or on his orders, the responsibility lay with him.

This did not sit well with the *mwami*, who seems to have immediately regretted the death of his mother. In his grief and rage, he turned his sights on the person he felt had led him to this point: Nkoronko. The king's vengeance was slow in coming. Rwabugiri became ill a few months after Murorunkwere's death, and he reasoned that this was due to the fact that he had not avenged her death. Though he blamed Nkoronko, he knew he could not immediately act against him, because Nkoronko's faction at court was still too great.[59] Instead, Rwbugiri initiated an investigation into his mother's death led by the Tsobe Mugabwambere. Mugabwambere was not only a Tsobe ritualist—these were the ritual specialists who oversaw the *Umuganura*, or First Fruits festival—but he was also in charge of Murorunkwere's personal army. In the eyes of the kingdom, and especially of other nobles, he could be seen as above reproach.[60] Mugabwambere ruled as Rwabugiri had hoped: responsibility for Murorunkwere's death lay at the feet of

[58] Vansina collection, Rwabugiri file, T, 39.
[59] Vansina collection, Rwabugiri file, T, 37, 39. Also, Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 33.
[60] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 35; also, Kagame, *Milices*, 169.

Nkoronko and Rwampembwe. But Rwabugiri had not been idle while Mugabwambere was completing his investigation. Rwabugiri had solidified his alliance with Rwakagara—Nyiramongi's brother—by marrying his daughter, Kanjogera. She was renowned for her beauty. She also had two brothers, Kabare and Ruhinankiko, who were accomplished warriors and powerful allies for Rwabugiri. On the occasion of their marriage, Rwabugiri gave Kanjogera the *umugabekazi*'s own army, which continued to be led by Mugabwambere. This was a powerful symbol that the Ega were restored to their previous power, the sins of the Abagereka eradicated with their faction.

Confident of his newly-strengthened alliances, Rwabugiri set out to avenge his mother's death. This would result not only in the deaths of Nkoronko and his nephew Rwampembwe, but also Murorunkwere's brother Nzirumbanje and his three daughters whom Rwabugiri had married. This group included Rutarindwa's mother, Nyiraburunga. Nzirumbanje and his daughters all decided, in the wake of the revelations about Murorunkwere's relationship with Seruteganya that Murorunkwere's ship was sinking. They abandoned her, and actively plotted with Nkoronko and Rwampembwe to bring about her destruction. Rwabugiri did not forget this. Nzirumbanje and his daughters, including Nyiraburunga, were killed in the five-year-old quest for vengeance. Nyiraburunga's death in particular would have formidable ramifications for the fate of the Nyiginya Kingdom, though she is barely mentioned in the existing literature. As I mentioned above, she came to her marriage to Rwabugiri with three sons: Rutarindwa, Baryinyonza, and Karara. Rutarindwa would become the most important of these (though the others played important roles during Rwabugiri's reign and beyond), because Rwabugiri made Rutarindwa his heir. But because of her involvement in Murorunkwere's death, Nyiraburunga would never be crowned as Rutarindwa's *umugabekazi*. That role

fell to another woman, from another clan. She was the infamous Kanjogera, whose actions would irrevocably alter the kingdom and its people.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Nyiramongi and Murorunkwere

Both Nyiramongi and Murorunkwere were powerful regents. Both unabashedly advocated for the advancement of their families, sometimes to the detriment of the Nyiginya. Both built political networks loyal to them. And both ultimately failed to enact lasting change, or to substantively transform the lived realities of elite female power in the Nyiginya Kingdom.

Nyiramongi's ambition knew no bounds. Though she had carefully and ruthlessly dealt with all her political enemies, she made the mistake of assuming that the men she counted on as allies—including her brother, Rwakagara—would remain loyal to her in the face of revolutionary change. What would have happened had she lived? Could she have remained a force in Nyiginya politics? Would she have taken up Nyamwesa's cause? Would there have been a civil war between her faction and Rwogera's? We cannot know the answers to these questions. The fact is simply that, even as extraordinary a woman as she was, her usefulness to society was defined by her motherhood. Without her royal son, who she came to despise, she was a nuisance and, worse, a clear and present danger to the stability of the monarchy. Her life past ruling alongside her son was inconvenient and ritually impossible. Thus, her life was ended.

Murorunkwere's legacy is even more fraught, and exposes more clearly the dangers of a powerful woman in this rigidly patriarchal society. Unlike Nyiramongi, who

came from an already-illustrious lineage, Murorunkwere's family was relatively weak and unremarkable. Her virtue as *umugabekazi* lay in the assumption that she would be easy to control, and to bend to the will of powerful men who needed a pawn through whom to carry out their ambitions. She proved unwilling to play such a role. Instead, Murorunkwere had her own ideas about what she wanted to be done. Perhaps this was due to her experience as a young mother, being set aside by her husband, and feeling abandoned. Maybe she came to believe that she could only rely on her own strength, and not on that of her male family members. Her relationship with Seruteganya is fascinating for precisely this reason: while she clearly felt affection for him and found him a useful ally, at no time does it seem that the relationship was one of equals. Murorunkwere was always in charge, never relinquishing the power she had worked so hard to build to Seruteganya, simply because he was her lover.

She also never again allowed Nkoronko any control over her life. Though they had a child together, and both actively worked to secure his future, they did so for their own reasons, and sometimes even at cross-purposes. Nkoronko seems to have been regularly frustrated by Murorunkwere's lack of deference to him. In the end, perhaps this is why he helped perpetuate the rumors of her pregnancy and "adultery." The adultery charge here is particularly telling. Murorunkwere, of course, was not married to anyone after Nkoronko set her aside. She had come under the protection of Rwogera when he adopted Sebizoni, but they did not marry, nor does there seem to be any compelling evidence that they were lovers. Where the oral literature claims some liaison between the two, it is more a torturously concocted myth to explain the "legitimacy" of Rwabugiri than any actual historical remembrance. No, Murorunkwere did not belong to any man. It would be easy to argue that her relationship with Seruteganya broke an important taboo

relating to the position of *umugabekazi*, but by this point in the nineteenth century, that role had turned into something quite different than its original conception.

By Murorunkwere's reign, three consecutive *umugabekazi* had ruled as regents for over a decade each before their sons reached their majorities. When they came to power, they were all young, and well within their child-bearing years. For other women of their social status, it was not unusual to remarry if one lost a husband so young; indeed, in a polygynous society, it is never uncommon for widows to marry, especially if women cannot own property. Marriage is less about mutual attraction or affection, and more about the protection of women and allocation of resources. For all that people have historically married for varying reasons, economic concerns have always been among them. So it was natural that when Nkoronko spurned her, Murorunkwere would have sought out another man. While she surely realized that she could not marry (what would the status of her husband have been?), it was not unreasonable to assume that she, like the men at court, could accept a consort, so long as the relationship was carried out discreetly and no children resulted from it. This, from all appearances, is what she did. She was certainly not wildly promiscuous, for that would have undoubtedly wound its way into popular storytelling. Instead, it appears that she found someone whose company she enjoyed, and that she felt she could trust with a reasonable level of certainty. For Seruteganya's part, he seems to have had little trouble accepting her elevated social and political status, and was content to remain as he was (albeit with a lot more wealth). At no time does either of them appear to have seriously threatened Rwabugiri's reign.

So what, then, was so threatening about Murorunkwere? Precisely what was threatening about Nyiramongi: she was an independent woman in a society where such a

thing simply did not exist. Both represented the possibility of women alone in the world, secure in wealth and status, who could afford to be discerning about which men they allied to their causes. I hasten to add that this could never have been a widespread phenomenon. The women of the Nyiginya kingdom were not looking at their *abagabekazi* and suddenly getting wild ideas about careers, casual sex, and contraception. The danger was far more subtle than that, and was probably confined only to the imaginations of the men in the immediate circles of these women. But that did not make it a less potent threat. The position of *umugabekazi* was originally conceived as a mechanism by which one clan could keep other clans in check. The idea was that the position, while held by an individual woman in each generation, was not really an "individual" position, but rather one held by a rotation of powerful families. In this way, it was really a power-sharing arrangement between the Nyiginya and the clans they saw as potential challengers. By dangling before them the possibility of both holding power, and helping to conceive the next *mwami*, the Nyiginya believed they could solidify their own position, and keep the country at peace.

This convenient fiction was shattered by the Ega supremacy that dominated the role of *umugabekazi* after Sentabyo's civil war. The Ega, both Makara's line and the Abagereka, began assuming too much power, and overstepped the bounds of what was wise or appropriate. Rwakagara, seeing that his own power could be much better served through a weak Kono lineage, killed his sister because she was no longer the most convenient route to power. Murorunkwere helped him achieve what he wanted: dominance over the rest of the Ega. But she was not interested in augmenting Rwakagara's continued rise, nor that of Nkoronko (who, we mustn't forget, was also descended from Makara's line of the Ega through his mother, Nyiramongi).

The problems arose for both Nyiramongi and Murorunkwere when they forgot that their role only existed to benefit their families, and not to give them individual power over the coterie of powerful men who supported them. Unlike the *mwami,* who must exist at all times, the kingdom could continue on without an *umugabekazi*¸ so long as one had been properly enthroned at the beginning of a reign. Thus, while the clan and lineage politics were ongoing, the individual women were expendable. An *umugabekazi* who could shrink back into the shadows, like Nyiratunga, could live a long and peaceful life. She could even quietly influence her son, if he was open to such suggestion. But neither Nyiramongi nor Murorunkwere were content to do this. Instead, both of them took seriously the mythology that the *umugabekazi* was actually equal in power to the *mwami*. Both of them wielded power, not like mothers, but like monarchs. And in the end, this got both of them killed. Had Murorunkwere learned from the experiences of her forbears—Nyiratunga's subdued and subtle power vs. Nyiramongi's bombastic and tumultuous reign—she may have been spared a tragic death at the hands of her own son. But she did not.

These lessons were not lost on her successor, though. Though Rwabugiri's choice of an adoptive mother for Rutarindwa may have proved fatal for the son, it was a crowning victory for both the Abakagara lineage of the Ega clan, and most of all, for its most storied scion: Umugabekazi Nyirayuhi IV Kanjogera.

Chapter 4

"She was More a Man Than A Woman": Kanjogera and the Apex of Royal Women's Power, 1877-1913

The Coup of Rucunshu in 1896 was a cataclysmic event in the history of the Nyiginya monarchy. A sitting *mwami*, whose legitimacy was unquestioned—even by those who overthrew him—was killed by his own *umugabekazi*, along with his supporters. For some, Rucunshu was an ending. For others, a beginning. The famous coup d'état that nearly destroyed the Abahindiro lineage of the Nyiginya clan, and for all intents and purposes installed the Abakagara lineage of the Ega as the ruling power in the country has been a central event for historians. The end of the Nyiginya era; the beginning of the Ega. The end of autonomy and the beginning of European meddling and administration. But any perspective that begins or ends with Rucunshu betrays the historian's own positionality. Instead of Rucunshu as beginning or end, for the catalysts who brought it about, it was simply one event of many in the most high-stakes of political games. And the ultimate winner of that game, at least among the Rwandans, was Kanjogera.

Umugabekazi Nyirayuhi V Kanjogera in many ways is both the composite and culmination of the ambitions of the women who came before her. She was beautiful and terrible; loved by her husband, feared by her people, and hated by her enemies. Unlike her predecessors, whose aspirations cost them their lives, Kanjogera's ensured her a legendary status in Rwandan history. She went further than any other elite had dared in that she succeeded in overthrowing the sitting *mwami*. She undermined traditional modes of monarchical legitimacy, and replaced them with German guns and a reign of terror

unmatched in the kingdom's recent past. She outsmarted the men who surrounded her, never letting any one of them use her. For her actions, she is remembered as a bloodthirsty tyrant by some, and as a leader and role model for women by others.

But she faced a challenge that none of her forebears would have considered: another woman, claiming the same wifely and motherly legitimacy that she did, with a formidable army at her back. Kanjogera's own actions had made Muhumusa's rise possible, which left the *umugabekazi* in a position that required both innovation and cunning, as well as the ability to walk the fine line between discrediting Muhumusa and her son, while keeping her own position secure. Though Kanjogera defeated Muhumusa and saw her son Musinga come into his own as *mwami*, it was undoubtedly a hollow victory. Musinga, the soft-spoken and meek child of two iconoclastic parents, proved unable to navigate the ever-changing waters of colonial politics. By the time he asserted his authority as *mwami*, it was too late to reclaim what missionaries and colonial administrators had taken. Though he fought bravely for the autonomy of his kingdom and of his people, the Europeans already had the upper hand, and the monarchy was reduced to a set of anachronistic performances that could not keep pace with rapid modernization. Heartsick and unwilling to actively undermine his kingdom's traditions, Musinga abdicated his throne in 1931.

So what had Kanjogera fought so hard to secure? It had certainly not been to give her son a chance to rule, since by all accounts she never relinquished her own authority. And the answer cannot be as simple as to give ultimate power to her family, since she spent much of her reign subduing her powerful brothers and their factions. Rather, Kanjogera desired power for herself, and the ability to exercise it as she saw fit. In the

process, she also fought to preserve an aristocratic way of life that had become untenable by the time she achieved it, though her efforts to defend it prolonged its life for decades longer than it could have existed without her.

Clan Conflict: Ega vs. Kono, and Rwabugiri's Disastrous Compromise

When he became *mwami* in around 1867, Sebizoni, the son of Murorunkwere and Nkoronko, and adopted son of Rwogera, changed his named to Rwabugiri. Thus he was enthroned as Mwami Kigeli IV Rwabugiri. His immediate predecessors, with the regnal names Yuhi and Mutara, had been cattle kings, and true to those expectations. Both had secured more cattle for the kingdom, as well as consolidated much of that cattle wealth into the hands of the nobility, creating a true aristocracy by the time Rwabugiri came to power. Rwabugiri, with the regnal name Kigeli, was destined to be warrior king. His assumed name means "The Boss," and he strove to live up to it. Rwabugiri's reign was a time of furious centralization and expansion for the kingdom.

Much has been made of Rwabugiri's reign. Colonial-era literature, and that coming out of the early years of independence, characterizes this reign as a sort of golden age for the Nyiginya monarchy, and uniformly describe Rwabugiri as a cunning politician and brilliant military strategist.[1] But other scholars, most notable among them Jan Vansina and Alison Des Forges, reject this interpretation of Rwabugiri's legacy. Rather, they describe him as a megalomaniac, bent on conquest but with little regard for

[1] Alexis Kagame, *Un abrégé de l'ethno-histoire du Rwanda, T. 2* (Butare, Rwanda: Editions universitaires du Rwanda, 1972), for example. Also, Louis de Lacger, *Ruanda* (Kabgayi: Vicariat apostolique du Ruanda, 1961); and, Bernardin Muzungu, *Histoire du Rwanda précolonial* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), for a much later example.

what happened to the land after that conquest. Vansina, in particular, emphasizes how Rwabugiri's continual warfare served mostly to recoup cattle losses back in central Rwanda due to disastrous epizootics, famines, and crop failures. He also argues that many of these natural disasters were exacerbated by Rwabugiri's continual movement around the kingdom. Such travels involved not only his army, but the entire court. This put incredible pressure on the local population wherever he traveled, especially since looting was a normal part of these travels.

More important for our discussion is Vansina's critique of Rwabugiri's alleged strategy of centralization. Since the reign of Mwami Cyilima II Rujugira in the mid-eighteenth century, the Nyiginya Kingdom had both expanded and become more culturally and politically unified. But it was Rwabugiri who oversaw the most important centralization, extending the control over the central Court into regions like Kinyaga in present-day western Rwanda, and Gisaka in present-day southeastern Rwanda. This was accomplished by undermining older elites—in some cases even seizing most of their cattle—and awarding new chiefships, or *abatware*, to men Rwabugiri personally ennobled. The traditional elites resisted these changes, sometimes in open conflict. In these cases, forces loyal to Rwabugiri and his "new men" would often violently suppress this resistance, and in the process gain land and cattle.

When Rwabugiri initially acceded to the throne, he was bolstered by his mother's Kono lineage, with some help from Rwakagara's Ega lineage. After Murorunkwere's triumph over the Abagereka at Rwesero, this alliance looked secure. But Murorunkwere sought, like her son after her, political allies who owed their fortunes only to her, instead of to ancient and illustrious bloodlines. Thus her association with Seruteganya proved her

downfall, because though his Tsobe clan was comprised of important ritual practitioners, they could not rival the power of the Ega.

In the aftermath of Murorunkwere's death, Rwabugiri sought to yoke the strength of the Abakagara.[2] To solidify this alliance, he married Rwakagara's daughter, Kanjogera. This happened not long after Murorunkwere's murder, and during the time in which Rwabugiri was still exacting vengeance on those he held responsible. Among those who died for supporting the actions that doomed Murorunkwere were her brother, Nzirumbanje, and his three daughters who were, at the time, married to Rwabugiri. When Rwabugiri had these wives executed, he did not extend their condemnation to his adopted sons. Both Nyiraburunga and Nyiraharaye had sons with their first husbands that Rwabugiri adopted. Nyiraharaye's sons Baryinyonza, Burabyo, and Muhigirwa would play major roles at Court during Rwabugiri's reign, and would all become targets of the Abakagara after his death. Nyiraburunga's son Rutarindwa became Rwabugiri's heir.

Why did Rwabugiri choose Rutarindwa as his heir and co-ruler? He had other biological sons, including Kanjogera's, Musinga. It is difficult to discern Rwabugiri's actual intentions. However, what is clear is that he used Rutarindwa's accession as a means to bridge the divide between the Ega and Kono factions at Court. Rwabugiri named Rutarindwa his co-ruler in 1889 in a rather stunning move. Though the nineteenth-century had seen its share of joint-rulership through the regencies of Nyiratunga, Nyiramongi, and Murorunkwere, no *mwami* had ever before actually had his successor

[2] Makara's lineage, to which both Nyiratunga and Nyiramongi belonged, was renamed for Nyiramongi's brother, Rwakagara, who had become the head of the lineage during Nyiramongi's reign. Hence, Abakagara.

enthroned while he still lived.[3] Yet this is exactly what Rwabugiri did with Rutardinwa, who took the regnal name of Mibambwe.

Since Rutarindwa's biological mother, Nyiraburunga, had been executed several years earlier owing to her involvement in Murorunkwere's death, Rwabugiri named an adoptive *umugabekazi*. This had been done several times; according to custom, the adoptive mother should have been of the same clan as the biological mother, and should not have any sons of her own eligible to become *mwami*. Rwabugiri paid no attention to this, and instead named Kanjogera as Rutarindwa's adoptive mother. He probably did this because she was his favorite wife. Also, in the absence of any other *umugabekazi*, Kanjogera's new status meant that she traveled more often with Rwabugiri's continuously-moving Court. Rwabugiri saw this compromise as a way to both end the conflict between the Ega and Kono, as well as to bolster the flagging Nyiginya. If there was ever an assumption that proves that Rwabugiri was not the cunning political mind that so many early historians claim, this is it. By naming Kanjogera *umugabekazi*, he not only signed his heir's death warrant, but also sounded the death knell for the supremacy of the royal Abahindiro lineage of the Nyiginya. The Abakagara had been trying to undermine the ruling dynasty with varying levels of subtlety for decades; on the occasion of Rwabugiri's death in 1895, the Ega dropped all pretense and engaged in open conflict.

After Rwabugiri's death, there was no need for a formal accession, since Rutarindwa had been ruling alongside his father for six years. But Kanjogera seized her chance. The Abakagara faction at court was much weaker than that of Rutarindwa.

[3] Prior to the War of the Ibigina in the late eighteenth century, *bami* regularly named their successors while they were still alive, and these successors often ruled with them. But they were not ritually inaugurated. This is an important difference for Rwabugiri and Rutarindwa. There is a distinct possibility that Rwabugiri was trying to prevent a second Ibigina-style war by ensuring that no one could question the legitimacy of his heir.

Kanjogera initially had only her brothers Kabare and Ruhinankiko as allies; Rutardinwa counted among his not only his brothers Baryinyonza, Burabyo, and Muhigirwa, but also his father's closest advisors Bisangwa and Mugugu. These two had served his father and stayed in his good graces for his entire reign, which was unheard of for Rwabugiri. Both headed important armies, and it is for this reason that Kanjogera targeted them first. Ironically, it was the Belgians that gave Kanjogera her opportunity. A small contingent had established a camp at Shangi, just south of Lake Kivu in the Kinyaga region of western Rwanda. Kanjogera and her brothers were able to convince Bisangwa and Muhigirwa that these Europeans represented a grave insult to the kingdom, and that armies should be sent to drive them out. When the armies arrived at Shangi in 1896, they stood little chance against the Belgian guns. A few volleys wreaked enormous damage on Bisangwa's Uruhango army. When he himself went to confront the Belgian officer Captain Sandrart, the officer simply shot him in the head. Muhigirwa fled to the northeast of the country, understanding too late Kanjogera's move against him. There he joined another rebellion against the court. But it was too late for him to save Rutarindwa. Mugugu, who was still back at court, reportedly warned Rutarindwa, "They are cutting off your arms and you don't realize it."[4]

By December 1896, Kanjogera had eliminated most of Rutarindwa's support and was ready to attack. Rutarindwa was at Rucunshu, building a new royal residence. Because it was still under construction, he was living in a small house which was not well-defended as royal residences usually were. Kabare's army came upon this situation, and the circumstances were too good for him to pass up. He attacked Rutarindwa's

[4] Alison Liebhafsky Des Forges, *Defeat Is the Only Bad News: Rwanda under Musinga, 1896 -1931* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).

position. Though the fighting took most of the day, the odds were in Kabare's favor. As the battle turned, Kabare hoisted the young Musinga—who was around 14 years old—on his shoulders, and declared him *mwami*. Other soldiers rallied around. Seeing this, Rutarindwa's supporters lost heart. They were either killed in battle or committed suicide. Rutarindwa also killed himself, and set his house on fire. There were many royal treasures in the house, but none so great as the Kalinga drum, which signified kingship and the ritual legitimacy of that position. Kanjogera was reportedly deeply concerned about the loss of the drum. To her, it was a weakness for her son, and thus for her own claim to power. Her brother Kabare, however, saw things differently: "We have the *mwami*; we can make the drum."[5]

Rucunshu was not the beginning of Kanjogera's reign, nor the end of Rwandan autonomy. It was, however, the end of an era of kingship begun with Cyilima Rujugira's recalibration of kingly authority in the mid-eighteenth century. Rujugira, by all accounts a usurper, had reconceived the legitimacy of kingship. He instituted the cycle of regnal names, as well as the rituals bound to that cycle. He created an official memory of royal history that was part historiography and part prophecy. By applying this cycle of names backward through previous reigns, previous history became well-organized and tidy, with any individual *mwami*'s actions interpreted through a ritually prescribed lens. Ritual, then, became the tool of politics (or perhaps it always was).

This served well when the *mwami* was the ultimate arbiter of power in the kingdom; using ritual as a tool, *bami* could portray their own political will as simply the destiny they had been given by *imaana* and the ancestors. But this became less effective

[5] Des Forges, *Defeat Is the Only Bad News*, 17.

over the subsequent decades as other power brokers emerged, particularly following Sentabyo's death and the civil war between his brothers. By the time Rwabugiri assumed the throne, power was determined more often through brute force instead of the subtleties of ritual legitimacy. Vansina argues that there were four distinct waves of violence in the last half of the nineteenth century, beginning with Murorunkwere's elimination of the Abagereka in 1867, and culminating with Rucunshu in 1896. Indeed, this is a persuasive argument when one looks at Rwabugiri's reign.

Vansina contends that it was a combination of the political use of warfare, and the preeminence of judiciary violence that ultimately led to Rucunshu.[6] Warfare, especially the competition over spoils and the political power of that wealth, kept elites in constant conflict with one another. Because accusations at court were a mechanism by which one could not only destroy one's enemies, but also take their wealth, these accusations proliferated. Further, Rwabugiri was paranoid and prone to execute first and ask questions later (as we can see so clearly through the murder of his mother). Those who kept his favor, especially someone like Kanjogera, would see the expediency of this type of extreme political violence. It is little wonder that such an approach would appeal to her as a way to secure the ultimate victory for her family. But it is likely that she also assumed that when her son ascended the throne, he would do so with all the ritual trappings of previous *bami*. The loss of the Kalinga drum should have been troubling to all the Abakagara. Possession of the drum that signified kingship was not simply a custom in the Nyiginya kingdom, but throughout the interlacustrine region. Rwabugiri himself had been unable to fully subdue the tiny island of Ijwi in the center of Lake Kivu,

[6] Vansina, *Antecedents*, Chapter 7.

despite having captured and murdered its king, because he was never able to find the drum.[7]

That Kanjogera would have been concerned about the loss of the Kalinga reveals that, as much as ritual was used as a political tool, and as much as violence had become the main source of monarchical legitimacy, even the elites may have believed in the rituals they sought to politicize. It is in this spirit that I approach an analysis of Kanjogera's actions. It is easy to create a false dichotomy between superstitious belief and steely-eyed realism. The fact is that reality is far more complex. The ritual code that ordered cosmology in the Nyiginya Kingdom, as well as in the regions surrounding it, was not simply just the codified and institutionalized set of rituals studied and compiled by colonial-era researchers. Though these are important data in aiding our understanding, they do not paint a complete picture. Remembrances, such as Kabare's reassurance to his sister, offer a glimpse into the mindset of the historical actors within these circumstances.

Kanjogera's state of mind is critical to how we can interpret her next actions. Her son Musinga, just a teenager when his brother Rutarindwa died at Rucunshu, was enthroned as *mwami* rather quickly. Though the Abakagara attempted to discredit Rutarindwa, claiming he was never the legitimate *mwami*, too many contradictions existed. Alison Des Forges pointed to Musinga's regnal name, Yuhi, as evidence of these contradictions. If Rutarindwa had never truly been *mwami,* then he was also never truly Mibambwe, his regnal name. Rwabugiri had been Kigeli. This meant that the next *mwami* had to be Mibambwe. But Musinga took the name Yuhi. This act legitimized Rutarindwa's reign, however short, because it acknowledged him in the cycle of

[7] David Newbury, "Rwabugiri and Ijwi," *Etudes d'histoire africaine*, 7 (1975), 155-173.

kingship: Mutara (Rwogera), Kigeli (Rwabugiri), Mibambwe (Rutarindwa), Yuhi (Musinga). Had Rutarindwa truly been illegitimate, Musinga should have taken the name Mibambwe, in order to keep the cycle intact. This act, as well as continued uprisings around the country, raised serious questions about the monarchy itself, and its ability to rule over the population and land it claimed. Kanjogera must have felt run ragged, spending most of her time trying to put out fires, rather than to rule with any kind of intention. Muhigirwa still lived; though he had given his tacit approval to both the coup at Rucunshu and Musinga's accession, he had not participated in either, and Kanjogera continued to see him as a threat. Muhumusa's revolt to see her own son, Biregeya, named *mwami* continued in the northeast, and spread west.

Des Forges claims this is why Kanjogera spent so much of her time trying to appease both the ancestors and *imaana* during the first months of Musinga's reign. She and Musinga offered sacrifices, and even pretended to have themselves killed in order to end what she saw as spiritual punishments for their violation of ritual principles at Rucunshu. Musinga's reign could have ended up as violent as his father's, had it not been for the fortuitous arrival of Captain Hans von Ramsay, German Governor of Ujiji, to the royal court at Nyanza. Ramsay had approached the court a few days prior, and was met with promises that the *mwami* would consider meeting with him. He grew impatient, and finally entered the inner enclosure of the court, where only those invited were admitted, without any invitation. He was met there by Mpamarugamba, the chief ritual practitioner in charge of ancestor veneration at court, who pretended to be the *mwami*, as well as Kanjogera's brother, Ruhinankiko. Ramsay described the latter as a "giant," which may not have been too far from the truth, since reports are that he stood about 7-foot-2.

Worried that the young Musinga might make the court appear weak to the Europeans, Kanjogera had set up this masquerade. Though she herself did not attend the meeting, it is likely that she sat behind a screen just inside the royal residence, listening to the exchange. Ramsay did not make a very good impression; unfamiliar with the customs of the kingdom, he underwent what he assumed was a "traditional ceremony," binding the court to him. In fact, Mpamarugamba and Ruhinankiko were having some fun at his expense, making him look ridiculous by tying himself to the "*mwami*" with leaves, and leaving without swearing any sort of a blood oath.[8] Though Kanjogera participated in this farce, it also set her plans in motion. In the face of mounting opposition, Musinga needed powerful allies to help him settle the kingdom and put it once and for all under his control. Kanjogera knew this could be achieved with European guns, because she had seen the damage they could do when Bisangwa's forces were routed at Shangi just a year before. She did not want to ally herself with the Belgians, who had already claimed part of the kingdom's territory, and threatened to absorb it into Congo. Likewise, the British were threatening the Nyiginya kingdom to the north, and claiming regions, like Bufumbira, that had been recently conquered by Rwabugiri. The Germans, on the other hand, did not present much of a threat, and seemed eager to partner with the court. Kanjogera evidently thought they could be manipulated into an alliance without giving up much in the way of Rwandan sovereignty.

With an alliance between the Nyiginya court and the Germans under Ramsay, Rwanda's experience with colonial administration began. It is impossible to categorize such a thing as a conquest, since the Germans used no force or coercion to enter into the relationship. Rather, it is more accurate to characterize this as a partnership of

[8] Kagame, *Abrégé, T.2*.

convenience between Rwanda's elites, under the leadership of the Abakagara, and other foreign elites. At the same time, the Abakagara were forced to look outside Rwanda for allies because they had alienated all others within the kingdom. The Kono had been severely weakened by Rwabugiri's purge after Murorunkwere's death. The other *ibibanda*, or matridynastic clans, had not been major players since the previous century and the rise of the Ega. Kanjogera and her brothers had systematically destroyed almost all of the Abahindiro, leaving Musinga an isolated Nyiginya king in the midst of an Ega aristocracy. After Rucunshu, it seemed impossible that the Ega could be defeated; yet, they were not powerful enough to really rule the country. In order to shore up their own authority, the Ega did what elites had done for centuries: they formed an alliance with people with whom they shared enemies. In this case, the shared enemies were not only other Europeans, but also those who threatened the stability and territorial integrity of the realm. Though in the end this alliance would end up destroying the monarchy forever, the reality is that the initiation of German administration probably prolonged the Nyiginya monarchy and its (Ega-dominated) aristocracy for decades longer than it would have lasted otherwise.

Sibling Rivalry: Kanjogera and Her Brothers

Like the *abagabekazi* before her, Kanjogera was a powerful woman among men. Though other elite women such as Nyiramuhanda would sometimes play a role in the intimate politics of the Nyiginya court, the *umugabekazi* generally found herself as the only woman wielding real and substantial power. Not always able to count their sons as allies—certainly not in the cases of Nyiramongi and Murorunkwere—these *abagabekazi*

had to create their own political factions by seeking out men who would rally to their cause. Nyiramongi's *akazu*, consisting of the great army chiefs Marara and Nyarwaya son of Byavu, and her brother, Rwakagara, is an example of this strategy at work. But, as Nyiramongi's example showed, this tactic would only work so long as the *umugabekazi* remained more powerful than the *mwami*. If that happened, alliances could shift suddenly, and to disastrous effect.

Kanjogera seems to have been imminently aware of this, because she kept a tight rein on those who served her. Foremost among her political faction were her brothers, Kabare and Ruhinankiko. Both had been renowned warriors under Rwabugiri, and had served him well. However, when the time came to choose either their Abakagara lineage or that of Rwabugiri's successor, they wholly and completely sided with their family. For this reason, they were valuable allies for Kanjogera. In their dedication to their family's position, they were of one mind. In part, this is because Rwakagara made him his heir, and Kabare became the head of the family following his father's death. It is also because, in the end, he won the struggle with his brother Ruhinankiko to become Kanjogera's chief advisor. As such, there are myriad tales of him throughout the oral literature.

For all of his importance during his life, Kabare did not leave many offspring. According to the genealogy provided by J.M. Derscheid, Kabare only fathered two sons. The reason for this appears to be that Rwabugiri, in one of his infamous rages, had Kabare castrated. Vansina refers to this in his *Antecedents*, but only in passing. It is also alleged by one of his storytellers in Buganda that the castration was in retaliation for an insult by Kabare against Rwabugiri's daughter, Berabose, who Rwabugiri had given to

Kabare to marry.[9] While the details of the story may be murky, Kabare's conspicuous lack of offspring may indicate its veracity.

Still, Kabare became his sister's greatest champion. His army led the attack at Rucunshu, and it was he who hoisted the young Musinga onto his shoulders and declared him *mwami* while they watched Rutarindwa's house burn with the *Kalinga* drum inside. And, famously, it is Kabare who is reputed to have told his sister that said drum was unimportant, because, "we have the *mwami*."[10] In some ways, then, Kabare was as responsible for the shift in monarchical ideology as Kanjogera, especially since he seemed less concerned by its implications. Ruhinankiko, on the other hand, is less well-known in the sources. This may simply be because he died a relative pauper, cast out by his sister, and penniless. But while he ruled, he cut a striking figure at court. As remarked above, he stood around 7-foot-2, and many of the Europeans (and I would guess many Africans as well) found him physically intimidating. But he was much-beloved by his nephew, Musinga.

Kanjogera had other siblings, and they played greater and lesser roles in the court intrigues surrounding their sister. However, she does not seem to have been especially

[9] This story is highly suspect for a number of reasons, but most especially because of the identity of the daughter in the story, Berabose. She appears almost nowhere in the Rwandan oral literature, except in reference to Rwabugiri's campaigns against the Bufumbira region in present-day southwestern Uganda. She may or may not have been Rwabugiri's adopted daughter, though she almost certainly was not his biological daughter. In Bufumbira, she is remembered as a governor of her father's interests. See for example P. Mateke, "The Struggle for Dominance in Bufumbira, 1830-1920," *Uganda Journal* 34 (1970), 35-47. But Kayijuka, the court figure and informant for Peter Schumacher, claims that she was also Rwabugiri's mistress, and lived openly as such with him in the last years of his life. Peter Schumacher, *Die Physische Und Soziale Umwelt Der Kivu-Pygmäen (Twiden)* (Bruxelles: Van Campenhout, 1949), 104; also, Peter Schumacher, Ruanda (Freiburg: Institut-Anthropos, 1958), 119-121, 177-78. See also Vansina, *Antecedents*, 190.

[10] J.M. Derscheid Collection of Materials on Rwanda and Burundi (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, 1880-1935), Verhulst folder, 4.

sentimental about relying on these siblings. Her brother Giharamagara makes an excellent example of this. From Vansina's collection:

> Giharamagara was the beer maker of the king One day Rwabugiri told Giharamagara to give him some beer for Rwabugiri's servants, but Giharamagara refused, saying there was no beer. Rwabugiri became angry and they started fighting. In the house, they were with the queen Nyirayuhi (Kanjogera) only; the servants were outside waiting to receive the beer because they were supposed to be called when the beer was going to be available. For that, no one knew what was happening inside the house. Giharamagara held Rwabugiri and threw him on the floor, strangling each other; when Nyirayuhi saw that she became angry and grabbed a sword to defend her husband. She killed Giharamagara and he fell down.
>
> Rwabugiri asked his wife what she wanted as a reward, between his land and his cows which were in a very big number; the wife replied that she only wanted to be his favourite and most cherished wife. Then Rwabugiri accepted to give that to her. Then Giharamagara was buried and a traitor was gone.[11]

This is one of many stories that feature Kanjogera wielding a sword. In fact, it became a popular trope among anti-monarchists during the independence movement of the 1950s and especially among Hutu Power proponents in the Kayibanda and Habyarimana regimes. Interviews with *genocidaires*, Hutu convicted of genocide, reveal that a popular story about Kanjogera which was meant to demonstrate the cruelty of the monarchy had her using the sword to kill Hutu babies as she walked among the people.[12]

Kanjogera's involvement in the murder of her brother Giharamagara was a warning to anyone who opposed her. It proved she was not afraid to take down anyone who stood in the way of her power. Though in this case she used violence in defense of her husband, she also used the murder in a blatant attempt to curry favor with someone who could support her ambitions. And Rwabugiri did just that by naming her the

[11] Vansina collection, Rwabugiri file, H, 46. See also Rwabugiri file, H, 41; and, G. Pagès, *Au Ruanda sur les bords du Lac Kivu (Congo Belge) : Un royaume Hamite au centre de L'afrique* (Bruxelles: G. van Campenhout, 1933), though this describes the scene happening in Nyamasheke, and without Kanjogera's involvement.

[12] Erin Jessee and Sarah E. Watkins, "Good Kings, Bloody Tyrants, and Everything in Between: Representations of the Monarchy in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *History in Africa* 41 (2014).

adoptive mother of his heir. It was much the same with her son, who, after he became *mwami* also became the key to Kanjogera's continued power. His continued safety was her top priority, and she had already revealed that she would not scruple to sacrifice someone of her own blood in order to protect him. It was not a lesson lost on Kabare and Ruhinankiko, though they would fare differently in how well they handled her.

Though the two appeared relatively united up until Rucunshu, after the coup, differences began to show. Ruhinankiko was much closer to the Nyiginya than his brother. Perhaps this is a function of Kabare's being named Rwakagara's heir. Ruhinankiko was especially close to Rwabugiri's sons Baryinyonza and Burabyo, who had supported Musinga in the Rucunshu attack. Ruhinankiko had been Baryinyonza's sponsor when he was initiated into the cult of *Imandwa*, which was dedicated to ancestor veneration. Kanjogera, paranoid as ever about plots to unseat her son, began questioning the wisdom of keeping the two of them alive and close to power. Ruhinankiko intervened for his friends, reminding her that they had gone against Rutarindwa, their brother, in favor of Musinga.[13]

Kabare used this to his advantage. He made his move through one of his clients, a Nyiginya by the name of Rutishereka, who hated Baryinyonza. Rutishereka began planting the idea with Kanjogera that Baryinyonza might try and overthrow her son.

> The Chief (Kabare), who had no conscience, wanted get rid of the dangerous prince (Baryinyonza) in his eyes. He started in therefore to accuse [him] to the Queen Mother, and was supported by his great friend Almighty Kabare. "Ba[r]yinyonza , they said, is Rutarindwa's brother, so he is able to be enthroned. But Musinga is an only son, it would be sufficient for Ba[r]yinyonza to murder him, and one would

[13] Both Baryinyonza and Burabyo were adopted sons of Rwabugiri, like Rutarindwa. Baryinyonza's mother was Nyiraburunga, the mother of Rutarindwa. Burabyo's mother was Nyiraharaye, another of Murorunkwere's nieces who all three married Rwabugiri at the same time.

> have to enthrone the murderer. It is therefore necessary remove the prince!"[14]

The conflict between the brothers and their clients threatened the unity of the faction that had perpetrated the Rucunshu attack. To have his uncles fighting amongst themselves was no better for Musinga than any other type of threat, because the whole kingdom could see that the Abakagara were easily divided. This state of affairs simply would not do. But while Kabare and Rutishereko were plotting against Baryinyonza, Ruhinankiko was doing some plotting of his own.

According to Kagame, Kabare's stature in the kingdom had risen so high that people began to think of him as a regent, rather than Kanjogera. This was an unacceptable turn of events for her, and her brother Ruhinankiko knew it. He hatched a plot with Kanjogera's friend and servant Karira that would help to get closer to destroying Rutishereka by turning Kanjogera against Kabare.

> But to do harm to Rutishereka, [Ruhinankiko and Karira] had to neutralize [Rutishereka's] friend Kabare. He had been the mainstay of Musinga's party and after the victory Rucunshu, and enjoyed an authority without limits, which was virtually the regent of the country. In order to neutralize him, they attacked by this same power. Ruhinankiko and Karira consecrated a form of unexpected propaganda: as soon as the Queen Mother gave an order to one or another of them, they said: "I will obey you without delay! But I will first say a word to Kabare so he does not turn against me!" The Queen Mother eventually became angry; the enemies of Rutishereka made her to gradually understand that Kabare's authority threatened her own. From that moment, the Chief Kabare was removed as her counselor, the Queen Mother wanting to make the country feel that supreme authority belonged to her alone.[15]

This story demonstrates Kanjogera's paranoia about being eclipsed by one of her brothers. Though we have no way of knowing exactly why she feared that Kabare might overpower her, it is likely that she simply knew enough of the history of her predecessors

[14] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2.*, 131.
[15] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 132.

to be cautious. After all, her own father had murdered her aunt because she posed a threat to his own ambitions. Though Kanjogera was not yet born, doubtless she heard the stories at court. As her own political fortunes waxed, the death of her aunt for being politically unnecessary must have weighed on her mind.

Baryinyonza was aware, though, that his status at court was, in Kagame's words, "precarious," and left to the South. He and his brother, Burabyo, managed to get caught up in their brother Muhigirwa's campaign allied with a rebellion in the northeast. They were arrested and brought to Kamonyi in 1897 where they were executed by drowning.[16] Kabare felt like he had won this particular battle against his brother for influence at court. But a he had little time to savor his victory. Ruhinankiko's whispering campaign about Kabare's power had worked well. Kanjogera was just as suspicious of Kabare's client Rutishereka as she had been of Baryinyonza and Burabyo, and largely for the same reasons. All three were Nyiginya, and all three had supported the coup to put Musinga on the throne. But this act, which most would see as loyalty, damned all three of them. Ruhinankiko accused Rutishereka of sorcery. Specifically, he accused him of attempting to wreak spiritual vengeance for the slaughter of his family at Rucunshu.

These intrigues played directly to Kanjogera's paranoia and willingness to destroy anyone who appeared to pose a threat to her son. When Rutishereka proposed to leave court and go east of the Nyabarongo to visit family, it was easy to convince Kanjogera that he actually planned to leave court in order to help raise a new pretender to the throne, Muhumusa's son Biregeya. After Muhigirwa's defection, the story was all too plausible. Kanjogera's actions were swift and decisive.

[16] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 141.

> The response of the Queen Mother he did not expect: the next day the Chief (Rutishereka) was arrested with all his sons and relatives present to the Court. All were delivered to the executioner, except Rutishereka and his son Rutarindagira. Their position as holders of esoteric code prevented shedding their blood in the country.[17] Absent members of the family were proscribed and killed wherever they were found.
>
> The Chief (Rutishereka) enjoyed a session for public explanation before the Queen Mother. "I am committed to your cause," he said, "you know Rutarindwa had saved my life, while his father wanted to kill me. The same Rutarindwa had greatly enriched me in appointing me as his successor at the head of the army Abashakamba and I could live in peace until the end of my days. But I preferred to abandon to serve you. Now is the reward you give me?"
>
> And the Queen Mother replied, cynically: "And yet you continued you treachery! You remind me that Rutarindwa was your great benefactor, have you saved the life that so enriched yours? Since you nakedly betrayed one who was your benefactor, who could now rely on you?"
>
> The Chief and his son Rutarindagira were put to the torture of the link. They were then killed by strangulation in a house that was burned, in the Chief's house in Ngwa, on the way to Mukingo. In this way, on the magical plane, we can consider that they are symbolically dead in their "home." Their bodies were then thrown into the abyss of Nkonde at Buberuka reserved for the holders of esoteric code. Chief Kabare, once so omnipotent, watched this disaster from the sidelines.[18]

Thus did Ruhinankiko take his brother's place as Kanjogera's closest advisor. This was good not only for Ruhinankiko, but also for Musinga. Of his two powerful uncles, it was Ruhinankiko that the boy admired, and who he saw as a protected loyal to him not simply because of his mother, but for his own sake. Unfortunately for both of them, Ruhinankiko's status was only temporary, and would crumble due to a fundamental misstep in dealings with the Europeans. This mistake would not only cost Ruhinankiko

[17] This is a reference to ritual proscriptions involving bloodshed of particular ritual practitioners in particular parts of the country. The court, in this incident, was west of the Nyabarongo in Nduga, which meant that abiru, of which Rutishereka was one, could not be executed on that land. Instead, he had to be taken to another region, Buberuka, where he could die without severe ramifications for those responsible for killing him. For more, see André Coupez, and Marcel D'Hertefelt, *La royauté sacréed de l'ancien Rwanda : texte, traduction et commentaire de son rituel* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 1964); also, Alexis Kagame, *Le code des institutions politiques du Rwanda précolonial, par Alexis Kagame* (Bruxelles, 1952); and, Alexis Kagame, *La philosophie bantu-Rwandaise de l'être* (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1966). For an example of a ritual bound by place, see David Newbury, "What Role Has Kingship?: An Analysis of the Umuganura Ritual of Rwanda as Presented in Marcel D'hertefelt and Andre Coupez La Royaute Sacree De L'ancien Rwanda (1964)," *Africa-Tervuren* XXVII (1981), 89-101.

[18] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 146.

his place at court and most of his riches and land holdings, but would also cause a serious blow to monarchical authority that would never be recovered.

After Kanjogera helped negotiate the German assistance in securing Musinga's throne in 1897, she kept her word and allowed a few groups of missionaries to set up churches and schools in the kingdom. The most prominent group of missionaries that came to Rwanda were the Society of the Missionaries of Africa, popularly known as the Pères Blancs, or White Fathers. They set up two important missions. One, in Save, was very close to the royal court, which had established itself in Nyanza in southern Nduga. The other was in Zaza, further to the east, in the Gisaka region which had been relatively autonomous and often considered itself a separate kingdom. While regional conflicts continued to proliferate in the early years of Musinga's reign, the Fathers often found themselves expected to take sides in these disputes.

By 1902, relations between the court and Gisaka had deteriorated into an armed rebellion against Nyiginya power, and the assertion of Gisakan independence. This was not the first revolt in Gisaka. Just a few years before, there was an uprising led by a Gisakan noble named Rukura. This revolt was aided by the Abarasa army, which was under the command of Ruhinankiko. Though the rebellion was put down, and most of the nobles either executed or fled to Burundi, Ruhinankiko was disgraced by his army's disobedience. He had more at stake than anyone else at court in keeping Gisaka subdued, as well as substantial holdings and relationships with indigenous leaders there. This did not prevent another uprising, however. This time, the leader was Mpumbika, one of the few Gisakan nobles who had not fled following Rukura's rebellion. He was descended from the lineage of the old *mwami* of Gisaka, and was in charge of several hills, including

Zaza, which housed the White Fathers. In the aftermath of Rukura's rebellion, almost everyone involved had attempted to obtain the support of the Zaza Fathers, who were popular with the local population. Mpumbika, a skillful and rich politician, was successful in currying their favor. Between his holdings, his popularity with the population, his lineage, and now his support from the Fathers, Ruhinankiko began to see Mpumbika as his biggest threat in Gisaka.[19]

Since Ruhinankiko was considered the court authority on Gisaka, his concerns about Mpumbika carried a lot of weight, and the latter was ordered to come to court to answer charges of inciting rebellion. However, the Zaza Fathers, his allies, protected him, and kept him from going to court, where they were sure he would end up convicted and executed. The court appealed to the Fathers in Save to help them bring the Zaza Fathers around to support them, but this simply caused a rift between the two missionary societies.

Finally, the court appealed to the German Captain von Beringe, who mostly sided with the court. However, he made it clear that Mpbumika was only to be brought to court to perform customary service for two months, at which time he would be free to go back to Gisaka. These assurances of Mpumbika's safety mollified the Zaza Fathers, who consented to let Mpumbika travel. Ruhinankiko was not satisfied with this, which appeared to him to be nothing less than the Germans and missionaries limiting the power of the *mwami* and his court. When Mpumbika arrived in Nyanza, he was imprisoned and fourteen members of his entourage were killed. After this outrage, the Zaza Fathers

[19] Alexis Kagame, *Les milices du Rwanda precolonial* (Brussels: Academie royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 1963), 162.

appealed to the Germans, and Musinga himself was fined 40 cattle, because Ruhinankiko was under his authority.

This was a huge insult to the royal court, but also a demonstration of the growing power of the German administration in Rwanda. Though Musinga was outraged at the fine, he paid it. Kanjogera, on the other hand, saw this for what it was: a further encroachment on Rwandan autonomy and on monarchical authority in the kingdom. She blamed Ruhinankiko for this and started looking for ways to replace him. Kabare had been sent east with his armies to Bugesera, which lay between Nduga and Gisaka. Kanjogera decided instead of decisively destroying Ruhinankiko, she would let the brothers fight it out. Kabare smelled blood in the water and took the advantage. The brothers' armies fought a series of small battles on the borders of Gisaka in fall 1903. This gradually brought Kabare back into the favor of his sister.

This last conflict between the brothers can be viewed as the final moment of Rucunshu. What had begun as a battle between Ega and Nyiginya was decisively won by the Ega faction, led by Kabare. Since Rwabugiri's reign, Ruhinankiko had been close to various Nyiginya. He had been unable to save Baryinyonza and Burabyo, but he continued to fight for the independence of his nephew, the *mwami*. Though Musinga did everything he could to keep his uncle at court, in the end, he lost out. Ruhinankiko was barred from court in 1905 and never returned. The manner of Ruhinankiko's dismissal is important: unlike literally every other enemy of Kanjogera, Ruhinankiko was not executed. Though he lost everything, he was able to live out his life, albeit as a poor farmer with no military or political authority. Alison Des Forges argues that Kanjogera's sparing Ruhinankiko's life indicates the end of the era of political killings that had begun

with Rucunshu (though Vansina would argue it began with Murorunkwere's destruction of the Abagereka in 1867).[20] But Ruhinankiko's loss also signaled the defeat of the last champion of the Nyiginya. The Ega, and particularly the Abakagara, had won ultimate control of the country. Though Musinga identified much more strongly with his paternal clan, the fact was that Kanjogera had completely isolated him from them. He was now surrounded, even in adulthood, with people more loyal to his mother and her clan that to that of his father, or any of his monarchical forbears.

But what kind of kingdom had the Ega won? Ruhinankiko's final mistake had cost the monarchy dearly in its demonstration of power. After almost a decade of continuous rebellion, the court had been forced into submission to the German administrators. From this point on, quelling internal strife would be constantly accompanied by attempts to regain control. Both Kanjogera and Musinga realized this and put their resources into defending the independence of the kingdom. But they were not the only ones who realized the threat posed by the Europeans. By the early aughts, those who would overthrow them recognized this peril as well. The leading figure in this was Muhumusa, another alleged wife of Rwabugiri.

The Other Woman: The Legend of Muhumusa

Of all the convoluted, contradictory, and obscured stories of powerful women in the Nyiginya Kingdom, the story of Muhumusa is perhaps the most confounding and

[20] Des Forges, *Defeat is the Only Bad News*, 44; Vansina, *Antecedents*, Chapter 7.

intriguing. I refer to her here as "Muhumusa" since it is the name by which the local population of Mpororo knew her during her rebellion.[21] But she is referred to by various names throughout the region. Most commonly in Rwanda, she was known as Muserekande or Nyiragahumusa.[22] Based on the sources available, both from the early colonial period and later collections of oral sources, there is some question as to whether or not Muserekande and Muhumusa were, in fact, the same person. This confusion is likely the result of the mysterious and uncertain origins of Muhumusa's introduction into the historical record. Here, I assume that they are the same person because they have become the same person within a larger mythology. It is entirely possible, however, that the Queen Muserekande is a completely different woman than the priestess and spiritual leader Muhumusa.

According to several of Alison Des Forges interviews, conducted in the late 1960s as the basis of her dissertation research, Rwabugiri captured and married Muserekande during a visit to Bujinja, a major trading post where the Nyiginya court bartered for ivory and female slaves. Des Forges' informants also contend that this same visit resulted in Rutarindwa's marriage to Nyakayoga. Were the women slaves? This is unclear. Further, according to Des Forges' notes on the matter, her informants both themselves confused Muserekande and Nyakayoga, as well as reporting that the stories and identities of the two women were often confused, leading many across the region to identify Muserekande as a wife of both Rwabugiri and Rutarindwa.[23] This becomes even more complicated because the rebel leader Ndungutse claimed that he was the son of

[21] Des Forges, *Defeat is the Only Bad News*, 103.
[22] The spellings of Muhumusa's many names are legion. Part of the confusion over colonial-era spellings of Rwandan names and phrases stems from Rwandan pronunciation; there are no distinct "l" or "r" sounds in Kinyarwanda, and so it took time for the spellings to become standardized. For example, "Ruanda. 1897-1898. Capture et evasion du Muselekande (Nyiragahamleza)," Derscheid Collection, Rwanda file, 37.
[23] See Des Forges, *Defeat is the Only Bad News*, 269, note 19.

Muhumusa and Rutarindwa when he attached himself to her movement after her capture.[24]

Whether she was married to Rwabugiri or Rutarindwa is ultimately immaterial, since she based her claims to legitimacy on the fact that her son was the legitimate heir of the *mwami,* and there was no question that both had been legitimate *bami*. What is decidedly more problematic for historians is that there is significant debate within the sources as to whether or not she ever actually *had* a son. The child, known as Biregeya, was never seen by representatives of the Nyiginya court, nor by European observers. Yet Muhumusa's rebellion was premised, at least in part, on her claim that her son was the legitimate heir to the throne, and that Musinga was therefore illegitimate. Kagame treats Biregeya as incontrovertibly real; Des Forges introduces doubts. Vansina refers to Muhumusa's son much in the same way as Kagame, though his sources also allude to some doubts as to the child's existence.[25] Of the direct accounts in the oral literature—that is, recordings and transcripts of raw interviews—no one reports actually having seen Biregeya, but rather just the proliferation of rumors about him. Therefore, we must necessarily treat his existence as highly suspect.

According to Vansina's informant Kabunga, Muhumusa (who he refers to as Nyiragahumuza) was from Rubengera, which is in present-day western Rwanda. She may have been born there, and then moved at some point to the northeastern portion of the kingdom.[26] It is more likely, however, that she was born to the northeast, and most likely in Mproro, where her power base grew. One reason for this assumption is that she is

[24] *Historique et chronologie du Ruanda* (Kabgayi: s.n., 1954)., 143; see also Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 161.
[25] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 161-62; Des Forges, *Defeat is the Only Bad News*, 117-118; Vansina, *Antecedents*, 137;Vansina collection, Rwabugiri file, T, 42.
[26] Vansina collection, Rwabugiri file, T, 28.

generally referenced as being a medium of Nyabingi, a religious cult that originated in Ndorwa and only moved west around the time of her rebellion.

The origins of the Nyabingi cult are almost as mysterious as that of Muhumusa herself, who was its most famous adherent. The mythology around the central figure abounds throughout the region, but most specifically in the parts of northeastern Rwanda and southwestern Uganda that were once the Kingdom of Ndorwa. Nyabingi is alleged to have been a queen or queen-mother of an Ndorwan king. When she died, she cast a spell so that her spirit could come back and liberate her people.[27] Few people living today remember her veneration, though older women in the northern Mutara province are sometimes familiar and remember aunts or cousins who were adherents or mediums.

Muhumusa was not unique in her abilities as a medium. Nyabingi worship, unlike many other cults in the region, did not require initiation, and thus it was not uncommon for people to act as priestesses or mediums. But Muhumusa took advantage of this as a way to build not only spiritual power, but political authority. Her rebellion was one of the most serious that faced Kanjogera and Musinga after Rucunshu, not least because Muhigirwa and his army rallied to her cause. Muhigirwa had seen all of Rwabugiri's other close advisors fall to the Abakagara. Bisangwa was sent to fight the Belgians at Shangi and had been killed there. Mugugu was murdered on Kanjogera's orders; so was Sehene. Baryinyonza and Burabyo had appeared to change sides and now supported the Abakagara. Though Muhigirwa himself had not openly opposed Musinga's accession, he had certainly not supported it, either.

[27] The authoritative work on Nyabingi is Jim Freedman, *Nyabingi: The Social History of an African Divinity* (Tervuren, Belgique: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 1984); see also, Schumacher, *Physische*; and, Vansina collection, Miscellaneous file, H, 11, 14, 34; and Rwabugiri file, T, 42.

None of this explains why he fled to the northeast and joined Muhumusa's revolt in the latter part of 1897. The oral literature provides no indication of a motive, other than that Muhigirwa feared for his life. Perhaps this lends some credence to Muhumusa's story of being a wife of Rwabugiri. If Muhigirwa wanted to be faithful to his late king, and felt that Kanjogera had betrayed him by killing Rutarindwa and installing her own son as *mwami*, then maybe he reasoned that his best recourse was to seek out another son of Rwabugiri to support.

At any rate, Muhumusa had been building up her power base prior to Muhigirwa's defection, and likely even before Rucunshu. But up until Rwabugiri's death, she had made no moves to overthrow the Nyiginya, or to enthrone her son Biregeya. What, then, did she plan to do? Des Forges details how Muhumusa styled herself a political leader. She began collecting tribute from local communities, ostensibly for spiritual protection. She also began administrating the training of soldiers and other corporations, in imitation of the Nyiginya system. Perhaps most tellingly, she started representing herself using an insignia that was supposedly modeled after the official symbol of the Nyiginya court. It was this continued identification of herself with Nyiginya royalty and the legitimacy that flowed from it that made her such a potent rival for Kanjogera. The storyteller Muhaya introduces Kanjogera's "jealousy" almost immediately in his story about Muhumusa. He describes how Muhumusa's marriage to Rwabugiri was mysterious, and that people wondered after she gave birth if her child was alive or dead.[28] Apparently these concerns persisted after the death of Rwabugiri. When Kanjogera had ascended to her ultimate power following Rutarindwa's death, she sent soldiers to find out if Biregeya lived. Her soldiers could find no trace of the child, but

[28] Vansina collection, Rwabugiri file, T, 28.

they captured and imprisoned Muhumusa at Bateke. During the night, the family of Byinshi dug a tunnel into the house where she was kept, and helped her to escape. According to this source, she fled to Ankole, in Uganda.

Why would Kanjogera have such a problem with Muhumusa? By almost all accounts, Kanjogera was Rwabugiri's favorite wife. He entrusted her with his most valuable assets while he was alive, including the life and reign of his heir, Rutarindwa. Though he did not choose her own, biological son as his successor, he still found a way to make her *umugabekazi*. As with so many aspects of this history, we must speculate based on the evidence we have. Kanjogera created her own worst enemy in Muhumusa. Assuming that the latter had no son—that Biregeya had either died in infancy or was never born—she should not have posed any sort of threat to Kanjogera. Except that Kanjogera herself had set the precedent of overthrowing a sitting *mwami* who the entire kingdom knew had the blessing of his father. Moreover, the Ega had experience with legitimizing a boy child as the "son" of a *mwami* when it enhanced their own power; just a century before, Nyiratunga and her faction had done much the same thing with the child Gahindiro. Unlike in previous succession disputes, such as that following the death of Sentabyo in 1796, there was a clear heir because Rwabugiri had enthroned Rutarindwa as his co-ruler six full years before the former's death. Rutarindwa helped his father perform the rituals of kingship as a demonstration of this authority. Kanjogera herself had been named his *umugabekazi*, and had taken on his regnal name. The coup at Rucunshu, while on the one hand can be seen as a struggle between competing clans, was also a blatant and calculated move away from the model of monarchical authority which had governed the kingdom at least since Rujugira's reign in the mid-eighteenth century, and which probably went back to the foundations of the realm a few centuries earlier. Specifically,

this was the idea—bolstered by ritual kingship lists, dynastic poetry, and historical narratives—that the Nyiginya monarchy had existed in an uninterrupted linear progression since the establishment of the kingdom by Ruganzu Ndori. The Abakagara's attack on Rutarindwa at Rucunshu not only raised questions about who could determine the next ruler, but also threw into doubt the entire succession of kingship.

This could be an unmitigated disaster for the institution of the *umugabekazi*. These women, who ruled alongside their sons, received their authority to reign specifically because of their relationships with both husband and son. By marriage into the royal lineage of the Nyiginya clan, they became eligible to hold power. But marriage alone was insufficient. Proof of that intimate tie through the birth of a son was necessary. And that son was required to be chosen, by his father, through a series of ritually prescribed actions at the time of the father's death. In all other cases of succession, including those in which the truth may be obscured or even a bold-faced lie, there had still been a generational transfer of power.[29] This simply did not happen in the case of Musinga. Rutarindwa's succession had been as unsurprising and unmysterious as possible. He had done nothing to cause the kingdom to doubt his possession of *imaana*, nor were there any questions that Rwabugiri himself had not appointed this son. The only objection to Rutarindwa's rule came from the Abakagara, who once again found themselves thwarted in their efforts to restore a king of their own blood to the throne. Perhaps the fact that Kanjogera was named *umugabekazi* made Rutarindwa's accession an even more bitter defeat. At any rate, despite her intelligence, wit, and flawless political

[29] The one notable exception is Rujugira's seizure of power from Rwaka; but because of claims that Rwaka himself was not the son of Mazimpaka, Rujugira was able to fit the contours of the story to this basic model. He also completely recalibrated the notions of ritual legitimacy. See Vansina, *Antecedents*, chapter four.

pedigree, Kanjogera ultimately only held power because her husband had chosen her to be the mother of his heir (even if that heir was not her biological son). By removing one son from power and elevating another, she did two important things. First, she demonstrated that even a legitimate *mwami* could be brought down with enough force. Rutarindwa was not overthrown because there was some great uprising against him; rather, the Abakagara were just more powerful, and could therefore do as they pleased.

The second implication of Kanjogera's actions—and I believe it is important to lay ultimate responsibility for Rucunshu at her feet, since it is clear that both Kabare and Ruhinankiko were only as powerful as she allowed them to be—was that it made her, unquestionably, the most powerful figure in the kingdom. Previous regents had been powerful, especially those like Nyiramongi who were able to attract important followers who possessed immense wealth and military power. But for these predecessors of Kanjogera, there was always someone more powerful. Nyiramongi first had Rugaju to contend with, and then her own son, Rwogera, whose faction ultimately defeated her own and resulted in her murder. One could also argue that Nyiramongi's brother, Rwakagara, overpowered her, not only because he killed her, but because it was his role as head of the family that allowed him to decree such a thing. Murorunkwere owed her rapid rise to Rwakagara, and the stability of her rule to Nkoronko and others. When these supporters abandoned her to support her son, or were killed by him, she was left with only her lover, a man so thoroughly her creature that he could not protect her.

Kanjogera was likely aware of these realities of female power. Perhaps it is for this reason she never allowed her brothers to become more powerful than her, even going so far as to have her brother Giharamagara killed. She went out of her way to ensure that

no man in her circle could eclipse her, including her son. Rutarindwa had his own power base, and ultimately owed nothing to her or her family. Clearly he could not be allowed to rule. Her own son, Musinga, was not only a child, but showed none of the fierceness of his father or mother, and Kanjogera probably knew that he could be easily controlled by her and his uncles. She took care in her ascension that only men she could control would be allowed to remain. Muhumusa, then, was a wild card. If Kanjogera's claim to power was that she was Rwabugiri's wife, and now ruled as a steward for his son, Muhumusa could easily claim the same thing. As long as there were people who would confirm her story, she could just as readily declare that her son was the rightful *mwami*. And she could do so using the exact same reasoning as Kanjogera had used to justify her own coup. For if Muhumusa's armies were more powerful than those of the Abakagara, what legitimacy could Kanjogera now claim?

This clearly became Kanjogera's foremost concern during the early years of her reign. Muhumusa escaped to Ankole sometime between 1897-98. She found allies not only in Muhigirwa, but also in two other rebel leaders in the north: a Twa visionary named Basebya, and a warrior named Ndungutse. Their joining together meant that, as a practical matter, the entire northern part of the kingdom was in rebellion. Kanjogera could not abide this. As she cast about for a way to combat the alarmingly strong forces arrayed against her, she found willing partners in a most unexpected place: among the Europeans.

The Three Rebellions and A Hollow Victory

Musinga inherited a kingdom in disarray. By the time of Rucunshu, only about a year after Rwabugiri's death, many of the regions he had conquered had begun to revert to their autonomy, or were at least resisting the control of the Nyiginya court. These regions on the periphery of Nyiginya power had, in many cases, been at various times considered part of the kingdom, though no *mwami* had ever truly ruled them. Rather, they might pay some tribute to the court, and would otherwise be left to their own devices.

Rwabugiri's model of rule—that is, the creation of new men and their installation in more peripheral regions—began to change that, especially in Kinyaga in the west and Gisaka in the east.[30] The north had always been a different story. Culturally, it was quite different than Nduga; its main similarity was the existence of a Tutsi-like herding class, the Hima. But the Tutsi nobility of the Nyiginya kingdom had always seen itself as superior to the Hima.[31] Still, most parts of what is now northern Rwanda had existed with relative autonomy, though the central court had always considered them more or less part of the kingdom. Now, with the added threat of European interference, bringing these regions under unquestionable court control was vital. Not only did the Nyiginya claim these regions for themselves, but they were also along a disputed border between the Germans, British, and Belgians.

With uprisings in Gisaka and in the north, Musinga—or more specifically, Kanjogera and whichever of her brothers was currently in her favor—found that he did

[30] For a detailed history of Kinyaga's relationship with a century of Rwandan governments, see Catharine Newbury, *The Cohension of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); for Gisaka, see Pierre Bettez Gravel, "Life on the Manor in Gisaka (Rwanda)," *The Journal of African History* 6 (1965), 323-331; Pierre Bettez Gravel, "The Transfer of Cows in Gisaka (Rwanda): A Mechanism for Recording Social Relationships," *American Anthropologist* 69 (1967), 322-331; and Vansina, *Antecedents*.

[31] Des Forges discusses this in her coverage of Ndungutse. See *Defeat is the Only Bad News*, 112. See also Chapter 2 of this manuscript for the use of "Hima" as an insult.

not have the military strength to subdue the rebellions. There were three particularly organized revolts, each of which lasted for several years. The first was led by Rukara, in what is now the north-central region of Rwanda, called Murera (or Mulera). Rukara's was the earliest of the insurrections, but by no means the last. Muhumusa's began not long after, but instead of attempting to liberate a region from Nyiginya control, hers had a legitimist cause that people flocked to. Finally, Basebya's rebellion took place in roughly the same region as Rukara's. Basebya is a fascinating figure. A Twa, he represents a group often marginalized or simply invisible in many political histories of Rwanda. The Twa make up about 1% of Rwanda's current population, and were probably not much more prominent than that during Basebya's day. They were, at the time, mostly forest-dwellers, though also served the royal court in various capacities, including as servants in charge of collecting honey. The Twa are still known today as master beekeepers, as well as potters. Their communities, however, often live in extreme poverty because of their marginalization.

Basebya was a favorite of the storytellers because he, like all Twa, was a pygmy. Because the Twa were often outside of the dominant political system in the country, and were only sometimes included in the religious rituals, their community was fertile ground for wild suspicions and fanciful tales. Basebya, one of Vansina's interviewees noted, was evil. He is alleged to have killed many people—in the hundreds or maybe thousands. According to this tale, he buried people alive, and cut the breasts and feet of women and girls.[32] But he also controlled a quick and deadly group of militias, which defeated Musinga's armies at least twice. The second time, he actually tricked Musinga's fighters

[32] Vansina collection, Rutarindwa, Musinga, and Rudahigwa file, H, 10. For a discussion of the symbolic violence associated with cutting women's breasts, see Christopher C. Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 1999).

into killing one another, each thinking that the other was Basebya's forces. However, this second attack was serious enough to force Basebya to retreat north into Uganda.[33]

There are conflicting reports about Muhumusa/Muserekande's capture by the court. Kagame contends that Muserekande, the queen, was captured and brought to Kigali in 1909, about 6 years after her rebellion began in earnest, to await the justice of the German Resident, Richard Kandt. Apparently she waited for several years while Kandt tried to decide what to do with her. Kandt's respectful treatment of her, including a gift of 100 cows for her maintenance, made Kanjogera and Musinga nervous, because it appeared that the Germans were taking her seriously as a potential ally.

Basebya was also cause for concern, and not simply because of his repeated attacks. He had been sworn to Rutarindwa and other members of Rutarindwa's faction. Kanjogera and the Abakagara had destroyed this faction, which was one of the main reasons Basebya's uprising had begun in the first place. He had no love for the Ega, but he had shown a willingness to work with Rwandan royalty. The court became increasingly concerned that Basebya might make common cause with Muhumusa, uniting the northern regions in the rebellion. If that happened and the Germans proved amenable to it, not only could it mean the loss of territory, but they might decide to replace the current monarchy with one more to their liking. To top this, rumors abounded of Biregeya's alleged movements, making it seem as though his appearance was imminent. This bolstered Muhumusa's movement, and in 1911, she escaped and fled north. Though the Germans had treated her well during her captivity, they had nonetheless held her captive. She now turned her sights on ridding the region of European presence altogether.

[33] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 160-61.

This new cause eclipsed the old one in her mind, but her legitimist upheaval was still fresh in the minds of her followers, as well as the Europeans. Yet it was under the anti-European banner that Muhumusa was able to finally join with Basebya. The two of them joined forces, fighting not only the Germans, but also the British to the north, as well as the missionaries that had set up along the border region.

Muhumusa's freedom was short-lived; she was captured by a joint-venture between the Germans and the British in 1912, though Kandt himself had failed to take her prisoner. The Germans decided to let the British handle the situation, and so Muhumusa was taken to Kampala to be held. Her cause did not die, however; Ndungutse, the warrior who claimed to be her son, reappeared in 1912. Basebya continued to fight with him.

> Basebya saw him as a true son of Rutarindwa and therefore the rightful King. Throughout the region of Buberuka they recognized him as such. The suitor (Ndungutse) would have a college of Holders of esoteric code (*abiru*). He sent for Bwimba to Gatonde to Bukonya (Ruhengeri); Bwimba sent his son Ruvogo. He brought the same Mwijuka, son of Mirembe, who lived in Gihinga (currently commonly known as Nyarutovu in the same Prefecture), he invited Musana , *mwiru* of Huro to Bumbogo (currently commonly known as Musasa, Kigali Prefecture) who delegated his son Mukiga. These *Biru* who knew nothing of the esoteric code were enough for him, because he did not know more than them. They hewed him drums, and from that time he pointed to Rwananiye as commander in chief of his warriors. All those faithful to Musinga were attacked, their homes were burned in Buberuka, and the expedition reached the Bumbogo to Igziba near Bugaragara.[34]

This was the situation that Kanjogera's actions, building on decades of violence before her, had wrought. Basebya had shown himself willing to serve a legitimate *mwami*; though he found Musinga illegitimate, he was not opposed to following Ndungutse, whose claim was perhaps less believable, but who had numbers behind him. Muhumusa was now in a British jail hundreds of miles away. But the mere claim she made to have been married to a *mwami*—it doesn't matter which, in the end—and to have

[34] Kagame, *Abrégé, T. 2*, 162.

had a son with him was enough to legitimize Ndungutse, when the latter had an army at his back.

Though Basebya and Ndungutse rebelled against Musinga, it was emphatically *not* a rebellion against kingship, or even against the Nyiginya. Rather, it was a strike at the heart of the kingdom itself, and a threat against everything Kanjogera had worked for. Worse, it appeared for a while that the Germans might take Ndungutse seriously. Kandt not only accepted gifts from him, but also sent him gifts in return. Des Forges argues that the Germans may have considered that installing a *mwami* that owed everything to them, rather than one only willing to entertain concessions to them, was more attractive to them.

This certainly would have fit the larger pattern of European colonialism. While in some places European powers were able to ally themselves with already-existing elites, in many cases they simply created their own. This was most obvious in places such as Igboland or among the Kikuyu, where chieftainship as imagined by the Europeans had never existed.[35] In Rwanda, however, the Germans had found elites rather amenable to their administration; Kanjogera had actually invited the Germans to set up missions and explore the country in exchange for their help in securing Musinga's throne in 1897. But now all of that seemed like a terrible idea. Fifteen years of ever-more-involved German administration had seriously undercut the power of the *mwami*. Musinga, who only achieved his majority around 1902, and then lost significant ground against his mother with Ruhinankiko's disgrace in 1904, had only just begun to assert himself as *mwami*,

[35] For Igboland, see for example Nwando Achebe, *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; for Kikuyu, see Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley, Vol. :1 Conflict in Kenya and Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992). This would become a particular sticking point during the Mau Mau Rebellion in the 1950s. See Wunyabari O. Maloba, *Mau Mau and Kenya: An Analysis of a Peasant Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

and it appeared that perhaps the Germans would instead choose another ruler who might be more malleable.

In the end, they did not. Ndungutse's star rose too quickly for the Germans' comfort, and they moved against him in early 1912. He was decisively defeated in April, though it is not clear whether he was killed in the fighting, or just beaten badly enough to discourage him from reforming his armies. Still, the defeat of this last rebel had come at an uncomfortably large cost.

Conclusion: Winning the War, But Losing the Country

When Kanjogera rose to power as queen in the 1880s and 90s, it appeared the biggest threat to her and her family were the Nyiginya themselves. She quickly and ruthlessly moved against them as soon after Rwabugiri's death as she could. In attacking and killing Rutarindwa, she thought she had completed a process begun generations earlier by her cousin, Nyiratunga. Kanjogera had simultaneously installed her family, the Abakagara, as the most powerful in the country, eclipsing even the royal Abahindiro lineage, as well as cemented her own personal authority by raising herself to regent. She had kept her brothers' ambitions in check, and ensured that though her son would one day come into his own as *mwami*, his personality would keep him subservient to her will. Though she had a reputation for ruthlessness and cunning, she never put herself out front of her son, using her brothers and other men as proxies to further her agenda.

But though she oversaw the culmination of the Ega's century-long struggle to overtake the Nyiginya, she also completed another evolution: that of the role of

umugabekazi. No woman in the kingdom had ever been so powerful as she was, and none after her would be her equal. In order to achieve this, however, she had utterly destroyed any vestiges of monarchical legitimacy that remained. Though ritual power had often been used in the monarchy to mask the effective use of political violence, the guise had always remained intact. The Coup at Rucunshu destroyed that fiction forever. Kabare's flippant remark, "We have the *mwami*; we can make the drum," was more prescient than he knew.

This erosion of historical legitimacy came just at the worst moment for the fate of an independent Rwanda. Political violence had been inaugurated as the new authority just at the moment when a new force, stronger than any that had previously existed, debuted in the kingdom. Unaware that they were bargaining away the kingdom's autonomy, Kanjogera allowed European guns to secure her son's throne.

Conclusion

The Legacy of the *Umugabekazi*: History, Popular Memory, and Social Conflict in Rwanda

When the genocide began in April 1994, the first high-profile murder was that of the Prime Minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana. Uwilingiyimana, a Hutu from the south, ascended to her post as part of the power-sharing government established in response to the 1990-93 Civil War, and in anticipation of the Arusha Accords that would create a roadmap toward democracy and the repatriation of Tutsi refugees who fled in the 1960s and 70s. She was the first opposition leader to hold such a high office in Habyarimana's government (1973-1994), and was the highest-ranking woman to ever serve in the Rwandan government. Her murder, which was committed by the Presidential Guard tasked with protecting her and her family, was also the first sign that this would not be a targeted assassination. In addition to Uwilingiyimana and her family, the Belgian peacekeepers from the United Nations who were sent to guard her were murdered and mutilated. This precipitated the significant reduction of UN forces in Rwanda, a fact cited as contributing to the West's failure to intervene and stop the massacres from turning into genocide.

But Agathe Uwilingiyimana was not the only prominent woman killed in early days of the genocide. In the southern city of Butare, home to the National University of Rwanda as well as the National Museum, lived an old woman named Rosalie Gicanda. She had lived quietly in Butare for years, surrounded by other women who helped her

keep house. She was widowed in 1959, and never remarried, preferring to live with her aging mother and other friends.

Rosalie Gicanda was married to Mwami Mutara III Rudahigwa in 1942, eleven years after Rudahigwa succeeded his father, Mwami Musinga. Gicanda, who was 14 at the time, was the ideal pedigree for an *umwamikazi* (queen). Her father, Martin Gatsinzi, was descended from Mwami Ndabarasa's son Semugaza, an army commander who fought in the War of the Ibigina. Her mother, Christiana Makwindigiri was from the Abaruranga *umuyango* (lineage) of the Ega, a lineage closely related to the Abakagara lineage founded by Umugabekazi Kanjogera's father, Rwakagara.[1] In 1942, she was one of two wives of Rudahigwa, but became his only wife in 1943, when he converted to Catholicism and eschewed polygyny.

Though Gicanda possessed all the trappings of an *umwamikazi*, it was all for show. By the time Rudahigwa became *mwami*, the office was almost completely ceremonial. The Belgian government had assumed control of Rwanda after the Germans lost their colonies in World War I, and administered it as a Trust Territory through first the League of Nations and then the United Nations. Though the official rhetoric paid lip service to eventual independence and self-governance, colonial-era documents demonstrate that Belgian officials had no intention of allowing that to happen any time soon.[2]

[1] Léon Delmas, *Généalogies de la noblesse du Ruanda: (Les Batutsi)* (Kabgayi: Vicariat apostolique du Ruanda, 1950), 78.
[2] See for example "Trusteeship Agreement for the Territory of Ruanda-Urundi as Approved by the General Assembly on 13 December 1946" (Lake Success, NY: United Nations, 1946); and, "Report on Ruanda-Urundi and Related Documents," (Lake Success, NY: United Nations Visiting Mission to East Africa, 1948).

Gicanda was a queen without a kingdom, and because she was childless, with no hope of becoming *umugabekazi* (queen mother). By the time independence came in 1962, her husband was dead, and the monarchy had been abolished in favor of a republic led by Hutu. Though many of the Tutsi elite—including Mwami Kigeli V Ndahindurwa (1959-1961), Rudahigwa's younger brother—fled into exile, Gicanda remained. She lived modestly in Butare, and though she remained for some Tutsi a symbol of the lost kingdom, she never attracted the ire of the Hutu authorities, even through periods of virulent anti-Tutsi violence and repression. That all changed on April 20, 1994. She and her ladies-in-waiting were rounded up into a truck by soldiers serving under Capt. Idelphonse Nizeyimana, taken behind the National Museum, and shot dead. Her mother, Christiana Makwindigiri, bed-ridden and close to 100 years old, was killed two days later.

Tutsi in Butare did not fare well during the genocide. An estimated 200,000 of the 800,000 who died altogether came from Butare. But Gicanda's murder so early-on, and on explicit orders from authorities in the genocidal junta leaves us with lingering questions about the legacy of the monarchy, and specifically of its female monarchs.[3] In her interviews with *génocidaires* in prisons in Rwanda, Erin Jessee found that many cited a hatred of the monarchy for fomenting their genocidal actions. A story cited in many of these interviews is a popular one for researchers. It involves a usually-nameless monarch

[3] Capt. Nizeyimana was the second-in-command of the Rwandan Armed Forces during the genocide. He was convicted at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in 2012 of genocide, as well as specifically for the murder of Rosalie Gicanda. He is currently serving a life sentence. Lt. Pierre Bizimana was sentenced to death in a military court in Rwanda in 1998 for his role in Gicanda's murder. The sentence was carried out shortly thereafter. "Rwanda Genocide: Nizeyimana Convicted of Killing Queen Gicanda," *BBC*, 19 June 2012.

who sharpens his or her sword using Hutu babies. It is most often used to illustrate how worthless Hutu lives were to what is very often referred to as the "Tutsi monarchy."[4]

But this story has existed for a long time, well before the genocide, and even prior to Habyarimana's coup in 1973. In a government document from 1972, the story is recorded this way:

> The Queen Mother also had the power to kill. Like Nyirayuhi, who had a sword named 'ruhuga.' Whenever she said that 'ruhuga is thirsty,' a healthy baby would be brought in, fed with milk and then put before the Queen Mother, who would then place her sword on the baby's tummy to support herself as she got up.[5]

The story here is unambiguously referring to Umugabekazi Kanjogera, and less than thirty years after her death. While stories of the monarchy and various monarchs have probably been "flattened" over the years—meaning that events and actions related to one monarch have been attributed to another, or the most recent—this story bears further examination. It is unlikely, of course, that Kanjogera ever did such things. Ruthless as she was, there is no indication in any collection of historical narratives or oral traditions that she regularly killed babies.

But the story is potent for another reason. It has had remarkable resilience in a way that other tales of the monarchy have not. Kanjogera's husband, Mwami Rwabugiri, had perhaps the single bloodiest reign in the history of the kingdom. His purges were

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[4] Erin Jessee, "Let Me Tell You About Rwanda: Iconic Stories and the Democratization of History in the Aftermath of the 1994 Genocide," presented at the 48th annual conference of the Oral History Association, Oklahoma City, OK, 2013, 7.

[5] "Ingingo z'Ingenzi mu Mateka y'u Rwanda" (Kigali: President's Office, 1972). Original text: "Umugabekazi nawe yali afite ububasha bwo kwica. Nka Nyirayuhi yali afite inkota ye yitwaga ruhuga, yavuga ati ruhuga ifite inyota, bakazana umwana w'umushishe bakamwuhira amata, yamara kumwuzura inda, akayimushinga akamuhagukiraho." As cited in Peace Uwineza, Elizabeth Pearson, and Elizabeth Powley, "Sustaining Women's Gains in Rwanda: The Influence of Indigenous Culture and Post-Genocide Politics" (Washington, DC: Hunt Alternatives Fund 2009), 12.

legendary, as was his paranoia. As I discussed in chapter four, he had both of his own parents killed. Yet Rwabugiri is often cited as "Rwanda's" greatest king. He expanded the borders, captured wealth in cattle, and was as charismatic as he was terrifying. He is celebrated. Kanjogera did many of the same things. In addition, she oversaw the centralization of the state under the shared authority of the royal court and German authorities. Yet she is rarely criticized for her involvement in the advent of colonialism. Rather, she is vilified for allegedly killing Hutu babies, with a sword whose name translates as "Killer." Why is Kanjogera's cruelty remembered when that of other monarchs has been forgotten? And more, why has she become the iconic figure used to represent the depravity and illegitimacy of the monarchy?

Rwanda, it seems, has a more complicated relationship with women in positions of political authority than simple demographics might suggest. The country is regularly lauded for its percentage of women in government—the highest in the world, at 63.8% in the Chamber of Deputies and 38.5% in the Senate. Rwanda, we're repeatedly told, is putting us all to shame. For its part, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the current government led by President Paul Kagame, touts these numbers as evidence of the immense progress his country has made in the twenty years since the genocide. Rwanda's constitution, adopted in 2003, mandates that at least 50% of positions in government be held by women. On paper, this is one of the most progressive political systems in terms of gender equality in the world.

Yet these figures do not tell the whole story. In her 2008 article on the increase in women's political participation in Rwanda, Jennie Burnet argued that while this increased participation initially had the effect of co-opting women's civil society into the more and

more authoritarian government under the RPF, there was reason to hope that over the longer term, this participation would transform women's political subjectivity, opening the possibility for more substantive change and democratization.[6] Nonetheless in the six years since Burnet's article was published, the results are decidedly mixed. Rwandan women have made gains in education, income, and entepreneurship. Local organizations around the country prioritize women's health and independence.[7]

But it is difficult to tell if this emphasis on women's development has or will translate into real political power. Peace Uwineza and Elizabeth Pearson's 2009 report for the Hunt Alternatives Fund analyzes the historical memory of what they call "indigenous" forms of women's leadership on the way Rwandans today perceive gains in women's influence. Surprisingly, theirs is one of the few studies to take this into consideration. Instead of merely citing the existence of female political figures in the more distant past, Uwineza and Pearson used this history as a substantive lens of analysis. And what they found does not necessarily give reasons to celebrate: "The dominant image of female political leadership to emerge from the pre-colonial period is therefore that of treacherous and illegitimate authority."[8]

The spectre of Kanjogera casts its shadow over the progress Rwandan women are trying to make today. This is not a unique experience for Rwandan women. Rwanda in general has yet to come to terms with its monarchical past. After the genocide, history was not taught in schools for many years. But prior to that time, it was a key part of state-led education. In her book *From Classrooms to Conflict in Rwanda* (2014), Elisabeth

[6] Jennie E. Burnet, "Gender Balance and the Meanings of Women in Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *African Affairs*, 107 (2008), 361-86.
[7] For instance, ASPIRE Rwanda, http://www.aspirerwanda.org/; also, the Rwanda Association of University Women.
[8] Uwineza and Pearson, "Sustaining Women's Gains," 12.

King argues that schooling during the First and Second Republics (1962-73, and 1973-94, respectively) helped to create intergroup conflict by constructing and solidifying the oppositional identities of "Hutu" and "Tutsi."[9] The monarchy was cast as autocratic and abusive, a Tutsi institution that made slaves of the Hutu. As Grégoire Kayibanda's PARMEHUTU (*Parti du Mouvement de l'Emancipation Hutu*) gained power in local, regional, and parliamentary elections through the 1950s and into the early independence period, these kinds of portrayals of the monarchy led to widespread violence against Tutsi in Rwanda. Hundreds of thousands fled the country. As King and Réne Lemarchand before her illustrate, once Kayibanda became president in 1962, little changed in terms of the material circumstances for ordinary Rwandans of any ethnicity. Wealthy Tutsi remained wealthy; poor Hutu remained poor, and vice versa.[10]

The situation also changed little for Rwandan women. PARMEHUTU was a male-dominated party prior to the establishment of the republic, and it remained so afterward. There has been virtually no analysis of women's roles in the independence movements of the 1950s. This is a troubling omission in the literature, but perhaps also suggests a reason for the silences. Since monarchical women like Kanjogera were considered "treacherous and illegitimate," in the words of Uwineza and Pearson, perhaps the new government felt it was necessary to keep women out of power. Aside from a few female ministers in Kayibanda's and Habyarimana's regimes, most women stayed out of the spotlight. That is, with the notable exception of Habyarimana's wife, Agathe Kanziga.

[9] Elisabeth King, *From Classrooms to Conflict in Rwanda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[10] Rene Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

Aside from Kanjogera herself, there is probably no woman in Rwanda more universally reviled than Madame Habyarimana. She was descended from an important *umuyango* (lineage) in the northwestern part of Rwanda, which was an autonomous kingdom until it was finally incorporated into the country by the Germans in the first decade of the twentieth century. This kingdom was ruled by what was known in central Rwanda as *abahinza*, which in contemporary Kinyarwanda refers to a farmer or cultivator, but was used during the monarchical period as a term of derision for the rulers of small fiefdoms or kinglets on the border of the Nyiginya kingdom. These *abahinza* were often subject to various forms of vassalage to the central court, but struggled to remain autonomous in the face of the encroaching Nyiginya. Agathe Kanziga was born into one of these families, who had ostensibly fled north into Uganda after German incursions into the region. Her family, however, still held sway, and she was able to rally them to her husband's cause when he staged a coup in 1973 and overthrew Kayibanda's government. Juvénal Habyarimana, President of the Second Republic, was born in southern Rwanda, around Butare. Though Hutu were the majority in the country, this area was the heart of the Nyiginya court, and so Hutu there had been incorporated into the kingdom for a longer period. Habyarimana could not have won the country just through support from his region. But he could with Agathe's family on his side.

Agathe Habyarimana, in many ways, embodied the essence of the *umugabekazi* in a time when the position ceased to exist. She used the strength of her family to bolster the political claims of her husband, but everyone knew she was the real power behind the throne. It was Agathe, not her husband, who brought together the group of radical Hutu who masterminded the genocide, including her fellow northern Hutu Ferdinand Nahimana, who remains the only academic historian to chronicle the history of this

region and challenge the centrist Nyiginya narrative. This regional defiance to Nyiginya rule is directly at the heart of the 1994 genocide, and why we cannot afford to ignore monarchical history.

As documented by Elisabeth King, the current RPF program of teaching history centers on the genocide. The precolonial period, when mentioned, is cast in nostalgic tones. This is consistent with its presentation in government-sponsored museums and memorials as well. While there are usually vague references to "some problems" in the monarchical period, these are never elaborated upon. Instead, Rwandan history is boiled down to the genocide, and to Tutsi victims and Hutu perpetrators.[11] The potential effects of this are dangerous. As King, Burnet, and Susan Thomson so rightly elucidate, this is already resulting in the types of divisionism that plagued Rwanda prior to the genocide.[12] Though it is illegal for researchers to now ask Rwandans about their ethnic background, it becomes clear through conversations about one's past that understandings of who is Hutu and who is Tutsi are alive and well. Hutu who lost loved ones during the genocide, either to the radical Hutu militias or to RPF reprisal killings, are not permitted a space to mourn publicly. The genocide, which was preceded by a civil war that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of northern Hutu in cross-border raids by the RPF's Tutsi-led refugee army from Uganda, has now become, officially, "The Genocide Against the Tutsi."[13] Opposition politicians such as Victoire Ingabire who dare to raise questions

[11] In addition to King, *From Classrooms to Conflicts*, see Jennie E. Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory, and Silence in Rwanda* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).
[12] Susan M. Thomson, *Whispering Truth to Power: Everyday Resistance to Reconciliation in Postgenocide Rwanda* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).
[13] "UN Security Council Confirms 'Genocide Against the Tutsi' Phrase," http://allafrica.com/stories/201401310147.html, accessed 12 May 2014. Burnet offers a thorough critique of this. Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us*, especially chapter two.

about RPF actions or to seek justice for its human rights violations are charged with spreading "genocide ideology" and arrested.[14]

But there are other, subtler, and perhaps more insidious ramification of this silencing. While scholars have historically divided the study of African history into three parts—precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial—most acknowledge that these are not so neatly separated. In particular, the "precolonial" period we so often refer to is, in fact, a very bizarre way of categorizing literally thousands of years of human history. This history is far too complex to put into a single period. Further, this categorization assumes the eventual rise of the modern nation-state; for example, what exactly is "precolonial South Africa?" Does it include the history of all the peoples who currently reside there today? Is Zulu history necessarily "South African," or does it exist in a different context? What about Khoisan history?

The other conceptual problem with this categorization is that it discourages scholars from seeking philosophical, political, and social connections between past and future, which is virtually the historian's bread and butter. It is why, in the case of Rwanda, we see so little engagement with its claimed monarchical past and its reliance upon clanship, kinship, and clientship networks to function. It is much easier—and intellectually lazier—to just pretend as though colonialism destroyed everything that came before it, and began the world anew. Rwanda, from this perspective, was prior to colonialism the home of two primordial "tribes," Hutu and Tutsi. It was only Belgian

[14] The law, passed in 2010, has had what Amnesty International calls a "chilling effect" on public discourse: "Rwanda: Safer to Stay Silent: The Chilling Effect of Rwanda's Laws on 'Genocide Ideology' and 'Sectarianism'" (New York: Amnesty International, 2010), http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR47/005/2010/en, last accessed 11 May 2014.

"race science," now thoroughly debunked, that convinced these groups that they hated each other. Now, of course, we all know better.

The problem is that this is basically what the RPF wants for the view of the past, and this is bolstered by its public historical offerings, particularly in the museums. They want an acknowledgement of a complex and rich "traditional" civilization under the *bami* (pl. *mwami*), but they do not want to grapple with its meanings. Why? There is a distinct possibility that the answer is as simple as ethnicity: the RPF leadership, including Kagame, are largely descended from the monarchy and aristocracy. Paul Kagame's father, Deogratius Rutagambwa, is descended from the Abakagara through a brother of Kanjogera. His mother, Asteria, is Rosalie Gicanda's aunt, the sister of Christiana Makwindigiri. So Kagame is descended from two of the most prestigious *imilyango* (lineages) of the Ega clan. This is also true for Kagame's wife, Jeannette Nyiramongi, as well as other high-ranking officials in the RPF.

These genealogical connections to the monarchy are no secret in Rwanda or anywhere else. They do seem, however, to hold a great rhetorical significance for opponents of Kagame's regime. A quick Google search for Kagame's background can send one down a rabbit hole of not only political dissent, but genocide denial and all manner of conspiracy theories. A certain amount of this is not unexpected; most leaders have fringe opposition that compares them to anyone from Mao Tse-tung to Hitler. Kagame is in a particularly fraught position because of his role in leading Rwanda's recovery from the genocide. But Kagame's actions in the region, and particularly in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo open him to another level of scrutiny. It is widely acknowledged that Kagame and the RPF have been the principle backers of a notorious

Tutsi-led rebel group in the DRC, first known as the CNDP (*Congrès national pour la défense du people*) and led by Laurent Nkunda, and which has more recently gone by the name M23, named for the March 23, 2009 peace accords that absorbed the CNDP into the DRC armed forces. As evinced by its activities in the last few years, including attacking and briefly occupying the city of Goma on the DRC/Rwanda border in 2012-13, this absorption was not successful. A mapping report authored by a UN panel of experts on the region provides irrefutable evidence that Kagame and the RPF have long supported the CNDP/M23, which committed heinous human rights violations under the leadership of both Laurent Nkunda and Bosco Ntaganda.[15] Though the original report was scrubbed of this information relating Kagame and the RPF after threats that Rwanda would withdraw its forces from the African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur, subsequent actions by the M23 made it impossible to ignore. In 2012 various Western governments, including the United States and United Kingdom took steps to suspend military aid to Rwanda over the allegations.[16] Coverage of Kagame's alleged war crimes does not simply exist in the extremist fringes of the internet; damning critiques have appeared in Newsweek, the Wall Street Journal, and the Daily Beast.[17] But for every thoughtful critique of Kagame's leadership and alleged role in war crimes, there are ten blog posts, many in Kinyarwanda, lambasting Kagame and the RPF for attempting to restore the monarchy. I bring this up not to give any credence to these conspiracy theories—Kagame is probably a war criminal, but also seems to have no desire to go on a

[15] "Draft Report of the Mapping Exercise Documenting the Most Serious Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Committed within the Territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo between March 1993 and June 2003," (New York: United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, June 2010).
[16] "US Cutting Military Aid to Rwanda," New York Times, July 21, 2012.
[17] Carol Bogert, "A President in Crisis," *The Daily Beast*, September 19 2010; Howard W. French, "The Case against Rwanda's President Paul Kagame," *Newsweek*, January 14 2013; Howard W. French, "How Rwanda's Paul Kagame Exploits Us Guilt," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 19 2014.

campaign to reconquer the lands won by Mwami Rwabugiri in the late nineteenth century, as some of these claim. Rather, these wild accusations deserve some attention because of what they tell us about political discourse in Rwanda today.

For all its progress in development, and particularly in gender equality, Rwanda is not a free country. The RPF keeps a tight grip on any kind of political opposition, allowing only political parties that present no real threat, and certain none that suggest a revision to its official version of history. Likewise, a recent restructuring of the higher education system has replaced most of the old faculty of History at the National University of Rwanda with scholars whose concern is the genocide and its immediate antecedents. In the RPF's attempts to divert attention from the monarchical past, it has inadvertently fed the (internet) trolls. This is not irrelevant: recent research like Erin Jessee's has revealed the rhetorical power the monarchy continues to have over the political imaginations of everyday Rwandans. Hassan Ngeze, the chief propagandist for Agathe Kanziga's *akazu* of *génocidaires* included in his now-infamous *Hutu Ten Commandments* the admonition for Rwandan Hutu to spread the ideology of the "Hutu Social Revolution."[18] The revolution of which he spoke was the revolution led by Kayibanda and PARMEHUTU, which advocated for the destruction of the monarchy, and targeted Tutsi civilians property violence and massacres beginning in 1959.[19] Ferdinand Nahimana, a noted critic of the supremacy of the central court in Rwandan history and politics did not rally to Madame Habyarimana's cause by accident: memories of what the court called "expansion," but what northwestern Hutu remembered as violent

[18] John A. Berry, and Carol Pott Berry, *Genocide in Rwanda: A Collective Memory* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1999), 113-15.
[19] Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

subjugation were strong as recently as twenty years ago. Memories of conquest dominate in the region for good reason, as explicated in the UN reports from the period of the Trust Territory in the 1950s. For example, in the run-up to independence, the monarchy led by Mwami Rudahigwa attempted to relegitimize itself by trying to abolish ethnic terminology, and encouraging Rwandans to unite around their king, adopting the symbols of kingship as their common national iconography. But this was unacceptable to Hutu leaders. One of the major points of contention was over the continued use of the symbolic Kalinga drum, which embodied the legitimacy and power of the *mwami*. Historically, the drum had been decorated with the genitalia and heads of conquered kings, which APROSOMA (Association pour la promotion de la masse, another leading Hutu party like PARMEHUTU) leader Joseph Habyarimana Gitera pointed out were predominantly Hutu kings from the northwest. The abolition of the Kalinga as a national symbol was a crucial part of the Hutu Social Movement's demands.[20] Further, royal imagery was invoked to criticize Agathe Habyarimana as well. Christopher Taylor documents in his book about the symbolic violence of the genocide how Habyarimana was cast in a Kanjogera-like role in the RPF propaganda during the civil war. This imagery has followed her into her exile in France.

So what does this tell us? First, the monarchy matters. It is not some obscure, distant history, but a living and vibrant aspect of Rwandan political discourse, regardless of how subtle it may seem. Second, popular memory of the monarchy is gendered in specific ways that present a real and significant challenge for the growth of women's leadership in today's Rwanda. If any recourse to past examples of women's power is

[20] United Nations Visiting Mission to Trust Territories in East Africa, "Report on Ruanda-Urundi" (New York, NY: United Nations, 1960).

immediately equated with Kanjogera's massacre of infants, women will have a tough road ahead of them.

The women who have achieved a more respectable status in Rwandan life have done so largely through the same mechanisms as the *abagabekazi*, however strange a point this may seem. Jeannette Kagame holds immense sway as First Lady. She was universally praised in every interview in which I asked about her. But she has confined her political activities to either the socially-acceptable tropes of supportive spouse and mother, or to thoroughly apolitical causes, such as the reduction of HIV/AIDS.[21] Though there are female ministers in the Rwandan government, they head agencies such as Agriculture, Health, and Gender, as well as diplomatic posts. These are all laudable, and speak highly of the progress of Rwandan women since the genocide. But none challenge stereotypes of the type of work women are capable of doing.

In this way, little has changed. I argued in this dissertation that the most successful *abagabekazi*, for all their power, still operated within the acceptable feminine tropes of wife, widow, and mother. Umugabekazi Nyiratunga (r. 1801-1845) was effective because she played on public sympathy over the tragic death of Mwami Senatabyo (r. 1796-1801), and the desire of the kingdom for peace and stability after the War of the Ibigina. By remaining publicly modest, she was able to affect subtle changes that would have a much larger impact beyond her own reign. Her appointment of Nyiramuhanda—who had sacrificed her own son so that Gahindiro might live—to the *abiru* was relatively uncontroversial, because Nyiramuhanda had proven herself a hero of the realm. Both Nyiratunga and Nyiramuhanda ceded their official powers to their sons

[21] Her IMBUTO Foundation works for the eradication of HIV/AIDS and the reduction of infant mortality. http://imbutofoundation.org/, accessed 12 May 2014.

when they came of age, and are remembered as noble and selfless leaders in the oral literature.

Umugabekazi Nyiramongi (r. 1845-1863) was a very different story. Unlike Nyiratunga, her cousin, Nyiramongi is portrayed as being a calculated political actor from a very young age. She had a strong sense of self, and a fierce devotion to her family—not her husband's royal clan, but her own Ega lineage. She accepted her father's weakness as a fact, and instead built an *akazu* with her brother, helping him found his own lineage, the Abakagara, that would live on into the twentieth century. By surrounding herself with powerful men, she was able to undertake more dramatic changes at court, such as increasing the *abiru* and installing men loyal to her. Though she proved effective at manipulating her husband, Mwami Gahindiro, she found herself continuously in competition with his *umutoni* (advisor and consort) Rugaju. After Gahindiro's death, their struggle for power intensified, and Nyiramongi defeated him in 1847 by using her superior political network to build a case against him. Unfortunately, her political ambitions alienated her son, Mwami Rwogera (r. 1845-1863), and they spent the rest of their joint reign battling one another for power. Their struggles undermined monarchical authority as a whole, and created an opening for Murorunkwere's Kono lineage to make a bid for power, with the aid of Rwakagara, who killed Nyiramongi after the death of her son because she presented an obstacle to his continued ambitions.

Murorunkwere was much more reckless than her predecessors had been. She did not have the experience of being *umwamikazi* (queen), since she had been married to Rwogera's brother Nkronko, and not to Rwogera himself. Her son, Sebizoni, was adopted by Rwogera as a way to subvert Nyiramongi's plans to seat yet another Ega *umugabekazi*

after her death. Murorunkwere's regency was dominated by struggles against the remainders of Nyiramongi's faction, and almost as soon as she had defeated them, she came into conflict with her own son, who had achieved his majority and renamed himself Rwabugiri (r. 1863-1895). Rwabugiri was powerful and charismatic, and attracted the loyalty of those pledged to him, but he did not trust anyone around him. His mother's perceived indiscretions with a Hutu court tanner named Seruteganya caused enough whispers to arouse his suspicions, and in an act of rage or madness or some combination, he had them both killed. The resulting reign of terror would last into the next reign, and the next. As part of Rwabugiri's rejection of his mother's Kono lineage, he allied himself more closely with Rwakagara by marrying his daughter, Kanjogera.

Umugabekazi Kanjogera (r. 1895-1931) represents the pinnacle of the power of the *umugabkazi*, but also the beginning of the decline of the monarchy itself. Decades of wealth concentration among the elites resulted in an increasingly poor, desperate, and disaffected population. The elites, meanwhile, fought bitterly amongst themselves, enacting blood debts and wiping out entire lineages. The most famous case of this is, of course, the Coup of Rucunshu. Rucunshu was the ultimate showdown between the royal Abahindiro lineage of the Nyiginya clan, and the Abakagara lineage of the Ega. Though the Abakagara, led by Kanjogera's brother Kabare, were victorious, they lost the most precious symbol of kingship, the Kalinga drum, in the process. Though Kabare was unconcerned and convinced that the superior might of the Abakagara would legitimize their rule, Kanjogera was uncertain. Unable to subdue the plethora of rebellions that arose after her son, Mwami Musinga (r. 1896-1931) was enthroned, she took advantage of the looming European threat to make a deal. Using Belgians on the western border to take care of part of Mwami Rutarindwa's faction (r. 1895-1896), she cultivated a relationship

with the Germans in the hopes this would bolster her own claim to power through her son. She also isolated the *mwami* by systematically removing all those loyal to her late husband at court, including her own brother, Ruhinankiko. By never allowing any of the men around her to gain the upper hand, she avoided Nyiramongi's fate. But she continued to face a potent threat, not just from the Germans and missionaries around the country, but also from Muhumusa, an alleged wife of Rwabugiri who started a legitimist rebellion in the north and threatened to unseat Kanjogera and the Ega. Kanjogera's own actions at Rucunshu had placed her in the position to be challenged by another woman claiming wifely and motherly legitimacy under the customs of the monarchy. Though Muhumusa was finally captured by the British and imprisoned in Britain, she remained an ideological threat that Kanjogera never fully recovered from. By the time Muhumusa was dealt with, German power in the region also waned, to be replaced by the Belgians. Unable to successfully negotiate the continued autonomy of the court under this new colonial system, Mwami Musinga and Kanjogera abdicated in 1931, retreating south to Butare where Kanjogera died in 1933.

It is tempting to end Kanjogera's story by casting her as a relic of an older time who could not grapple with the new. But it is not that simple. She had navigated the treacherous waters of encroaching colonialism deftly—far more than many neighboring monarchies, which were subsumed or replaced by new elites. If we view the coming of Belgian colonial authorities as simply a new type of elite, what happened to Kanjogera's monarchy was not unlike what she had done to its previous incarnation: using similar symbols, she was displaced by a stronger group, who claimed authority based on that strength.

So too did the older forms of social identity remain important. Though the Belgians introduced stricter and more permanent ethnic identities based on earlier models of socioeconomic status, clan, lineage, and region never went away. The histories of these identities were too deeply entrenched to be erased by a few decades of European rule. Tutsi elites remained, as did the less wealthy Tutsi that populated the south and eastern portions of the country. The main substantive change was that years of missionary education to the non-Tutsi population helped to create a nationalized and political "Hutu" identity among those oppressed by the monarchy and Tutsi nobility—which comprised only a small fraction of the actual Tutsi population of the country.[22]

The question that remains is how or if Rwanda will ever deal with its monarchical legacy. The demonization of Tutsi and blanket condemnation of kingship under the First and Second Republics was disastrous and led to a series of massacres and one of the worst genocides in world history. Yet it seems obvious that the RPF's current tactic of dehistoricizing, depoliticizing, and "traditionalizing" the monarchy is no more effective, and may in fact bring about similar divisionism and civil strife.[23] So what is the way forward? Perhaps the answer lies, as Elisabeth King suggests, in the creation of an education system that promotes peace through grappling with the difficult questions of the past. Instead of blame for past wrongs, using these histories to understand how they contributed to divisionism, and then using that understanding as a foundation for peacebuilding and substantive democratization. A reckoning of this kind can demystify women's roles in Rwanda's past, and absolve them of the sins of their mothers. The

[22] J. J. Carney, *Rwanda before the Genocide: Catholic Politics and Ethnic Discourse in the Late Colonial Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and, Ian Linden, *Church and Revolution in Rwanda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1977); also, Timothy Paul Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chapters two and three.
[23] Eric J. Hobsbawm, and Terence O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

creation of this type of openness can also create a space in which all survivors of Rwanda's violent past can be heard, and can mourn, and can heal.

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APPENDIX

REGNAL LIST

As I have remarked above, the chronology of the monarchs of the Nyiginya Kingdom is a matter of significant historical debate. I have used Jan Vansina's chronology here, largely based on his critiques of Alexis Kagame's idea of generational change as something based more in the ideology of kingship rather than on historical evidence. So I list Vansina's dates here, which exclude what he considers the "mythological" kings. However, the dates prior to the mid-nineteenth century are still largely approximate. Also, the dates included here are mostly representative of the reigns of *bami*, and not of *abagabekazi*, for whom we mostly lack death dates. The regnal dates include regencies, and the numbering of reigns (Kigeli V, Mibambwe IV, etc.) include mythological kings, since this was part of the ideology of ritual kingship.

*Indicates a co-ruler or regent.

Mwami	*Umugabekazi*	Regnal dates
Kigeli V Ndahindurwa	none	1959-1961
Mutara III Rudahigwa*	Nyiramavugo III Kankazi	1931-1959
Yuhi IV Musinga	Nyirayuhi IV Kanjogera*	1896-1931

Mibambwe IV Rutarindwa	Nyiramibambwe IV Kanjogera	1895-1896
Kigeli IV Rwabugiri	Nyirakigeli IV Murorunkwere*	1867-1895
Mutara II Rwogera	Nyiramavugo II Nyiramongi*	1845-1867
Yuhi III Gahindiro	Nyirayuhi III Nyiratunga*	1801-1845
Mibambwe III Sentabyo	Nyiramibambwe III Nyiratamba	1796-1801
Kigeli III Ndabarasa	Nyirakigeli III Rwesero	c. 1786-1796
Cyilima II Rujugira	Nyiracyilima II Kirongoro	c. 1770-c. 1786
Karemera Rwaka (usurper?)*	Nyirakaremera Rukoni	c. 1754-c. 1770
Yuhi II Mazimpaka	Nyirayuhi II Nyamarembo	c. 1735-c. 1766
Mibambwe II Gisanura	Nyiramibambwe II Nyabuhoro	
Kigeli II Nyamuheshera	Nyirakigeli II Nshenderi	

Mutara I Semugeshi	Nyiramavugo I Nyirakabogo	
Ruganzu II Ndori	Nyiraruganzu II Nyabacuzi	c. 1650-c. 1700