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Strategic Submission as Resistance? Nabongo Mumia in the Struggle for Post-Colonial Kenya's Histories

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Abstract

This article pursues the debate on the role that various regional leaders in late pre- to colonial Kenya played in their people's responses to colonialism and its agents, and the contests for moral historical spaces that have continued to be played out in intellectual and public discourse. Focusing on Nabongo Mumia, the political and cultural figure of the Wanga people in western Kenya, the article examines the fluidity between collaboration and resistance as processes that have been presented mistakenly as dialectical oppositions. Situating my argument within the counter-revisionist trajectory, I demonstrate that the earlier presentation of Nabongo Mumia – and indeed a few other leaders – as a 'collaborator' largely simplifies the dilemmas that many a leader were confronted with in the wake of colonial violence, and is used in the current political setup to rationalise deliberate forms of exclusion from central political structures in the country. I further show that for regional leaders in colonial Kenya, strategic submission guided by a variety of legitimate considerations, was often misread as 'collaboration', a line that was picked up by earlier Africanist inclined scholars whose nationalistic impulses drove them to a search for 'heroes', often guided by the matrices of 'resistance'.

Résumé

Cet article poursuit le débat sur le rôle que les divers leaders régionaux ont joué pendant la fin des périodes pré-coloniale et coloniale au Kenya par rapport aux réponses de leurs peuples à la question du colonialisme et de ses agents, et dans les combats pour des espaces moraux historiques qui sont toujours interprétés dans le discours intellectuel et public. Se focalisant sur Nabongo Mumia, la figure politique et culturelle du peuple Wanga au Kenya occidental, l'article examine la fluidité qui existe entre la collaboration et la résistance en tant que processus qui ont été présentés par erreur comme des oppositions dialectiques. Cette article situe l'argument dans le cadre d'une trajectoire contre révisionniste

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et démontre que la caractérisation de Nabongo Mumia et de quelques autres leaders comme « collaborateurs » sous-estime la complexité des dilemmes auxquels beaucoup de leaders étaient confrontés face à la violence coloniale, et est utilisée dans le milieu politique actuel pour rationaliser des formes délibérées d'exclusion à partir des structures centrales politiques du pays. Aussi, l'article montre que pour les leaders régionaux du Kenya colonial, toute soumission stratégique guidée par une variété de considérations légitimes, était mal interprétée comme une « collaboration » ; ce qui a été repris par les premiers érudits d'obédience africaniste dont les pulsions nationalistes les ont conduits vers une recherche de « héros », souvent guidée par les matrices de la « résistance ».

Introduction

One of the most trying attributes of colonialism in Kenya specifically and in Africa generally was the way in which it created a moral dilemma for a people regarding their structures of power and modes of leadership. Indeed the idea and practice of 'indirect rule' in parts of the continent could have been meant to cut the costs of administration, besides ensuring a broader acceptance of the new system, knowing as its proponents did that the Africans were so imbedded in their own conceptions and management of power. Principally, initial resistance to colonialism was precisely because it tinkered with long-held structures of power – appointing to positions of authority people who, in the traditional African setup, stood little chance of rising to such positions of responsibility either because of their personal attributes or simply because such positions never existed in the then structures of governance. Such resistance was in essence an affirmation of the existing philosophies of the colonized people, and in many ways elicited coherent and sustained rejection of the impostors and the system they advocated for. Historical, literary and anthropological texts have since emerged as part of the post-colonial discourses that record the tensions generated by that historical encounter, and the possible logic for the varied responses to the colonialist changes. For instance, Jomo Kenyatta (1938) placed the anti-colonial establishment in the context of the colonialism's disregard of the traditional power structures, and suggested that such responses were to be expected anyway.

The present system of rule by the Government Officials supported by appointed chiefs, and even what is called 'indirect rule', are incompatible with the democratic spirit of the Gikuyu people. It has been said that the Gikuyu do not respect their chiefs, namely, the 'appointed ones'. This is perfectly true, and the reason is not far to seek. The Gikuyu people do not regard those who have been appointed over their heads as the true representatives of the interests of the community. No one knows this better than the chiefs themselves, because many of them are only able to continue

in their position through the fact that might is over right. The Gikuyu knows perfectly well that the chiefs are appointed to represent a particular interest, namely, the interest of the British Government, and as such they cannot expect popularity from the people they help to oppress and exploit. In the eyes of the Gikuyu people, the submission to a despotic rule of any particular man or a group, white or black, is the greatest humiliation to mankind.¹

This quotation is important for us in two respects; first, as we shall see later in this essay, it relates to the predicament of ‘collaboration’ at the personal and communal level and, two, it signals to the breadth of ‘collaboration’, specifically as having transcended particular communities that have been contrasted with others that supposedly ‘resisted’ colonialism. Put differently, ‘collaboration’ and ‘resistance’ were neither simple modes nor choices of interaction between the colonized and the colonizer; they were indeed complex processes of adaptation to broad-based transformations of a political, economic, cultural, generational and social nature. That ‘collaboration’ and ‘resistance’ are much more complex than simple dichotomies they have for a long time been presented is to be borne out by the unending scholarly debates surrounding proponents of the two processes, and particularly the attempts at explaining the underlying psychology of the choices.

From 2003 onwards for instance, the Kenyan public has been sporadically treated to a debate on the idea of heroism within the context of increased democratization and individual liberties in the idiom of a second, sometimes third, liberation. Thus far, there has been little consensus on who a ‘hero’ is or was, and how such a hero should be treated. This lack of consensus is partly due to the fact that the whole debate has been hijacked by political interests in a context of continued competition of ethnic polities within the country. This is such that identification of individuals as heroes precedes demands by some people from their ethnic communities to be given preferential treatment as recognition of the hero’s contribution to the present Kenya, or, inversely, of the condemnation of the same person by politicians from outlying communities who may feel slighted by their neighbour’s recognition.

Two examples easily come to mind in this regard. One occurred some time in 2003 soon after Kibaki’s ascension to power. It refers to the much hyped return of historical General Mathenge, a figurehead of the Mau Mau war of liberation, after years in Ethiopia. Prior to the planned date of Mathenge’s return, the Kenyan public was treated to a barrage of media coverage of the planned return, with government involvement quite noticeable. At this point, there was nothing much by way of resistance to the idea of Mathenge’s return. But the actual return of the same Mathenge caused excitement because

of the blazing publicity that engulfed his arrival; the excitement led to anxiety and doubt when the old man appeared lost and ultimately the doubt turned to be a big embarrassment for the government and specifically the people involved in the logistics and publicity.

The initial response to the confirmation that the supposed General Mathenge was not just him led to a lot of amusement by some people from different parts of the country, who debatably thought the whole thing was part of a bigger scheme that was meant to muffle the rest into submission as one community embarked on a mission to further empower and enrich itself. Then, the rest of the Kenyan people began asking questions. Why did the government find it necessary to ship back the man, even if he was indeed General Mathenge, after years of 'neglect'? Was the return supposed to bear some symbolic meaning? That Mathenge's return was facilitated during Mwai Kibaki's first term as president is notable and could well have been symbolic.²

The second example relates to the debate that surrounded the change of the name of the former Western University College (then a constituent college of Moi University), now Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology. Leaders from around Kakamega town, where the university is located, argued that naming an institution of such an important value in society after an 'outsider' not only belittled them, but also suggested that there was no one from around Kakamega who was worth recognizing with such honour. On the defensive, leaders from Bungoma and Trans-Nzoia where Masinde Muliro came from sought to downplay such accusations. They claimed that Muliro was a national leader and any suggestion that his influence and vision was limited to Bungoma was in itself disrespectful of the man himself.³

These debates have necessitated a return to the past of Kenya's struggle for independence and the role of specific individuals in the same struggle, alongside a tendency to reflect on the Kenyatta and Moi regimes as having overseen the destruction of the ideals of independence. Hence, some people have (rightly and wrongly) cast aspersions at the liberation credentials of the two leaders, in a sense re-reading their role in the making of Kenyan history alongside that of other leaders hitherto only footnoted or dubiously presented as having stood in the way of the struggle. Subsequently, various communities and their leaders have embarked on audible reinvention of their 'heroes' – some of them prominent players in the making of Kenya's anti-colonial struggles, as is the case with General Mathenge of the Kikuyu and Masinde Muliro of the Bukusu people. Others include Samoei Koitalel of the Nandi and, interestingly, Nabongo Mumia of the Wanga people. Interestingly because for a long time now the historical figure of Nabongo Mumia in Kenya's

history has had the dubious distinction of being one of the most notorious ethnic leaders who was a ‘collaborator’ with the colonial establishment.

The tag of collaborator is imbued with connotations of cowardice, unbridled love for the colonial system, lack of patriotism, and is also understood in many ways as the real antithesis of heroism. Yet, this distinction notwithstanding, the memory of Nabongo Mumia lives on in the heart and mind of many a people, especially those from around Mumias, a place appropriately named after the most famous son of the region. The questions then are, was Nabongo Mumia really a collaborator? What were his options, when faced with the might of colonial weaponry and ruthlessness? Could he have simply been pragmatic? How did his immediate subjects perceive him? I seek answers to these questions by revisiting the current history that has damned the image of Nabongo Mumia. My position is that the projection of Nabongo Mumia as a ‘collaborator’ is rather simplistic in as far as it projects collaboration and resistance in dichotomous terms, as well as de-linking such processes from the crucial circumstances that informed them. I am inclined towards understanding the dynamics of colonialism in Kenya as complex choices and responses made in difficult circumstances. Whether this is a question of positionality or not is secondary to the point that the revisionist impulse in reading political history of Kenya invites a second gaze at figures whose place in history has thus far been assured, whether glamorously or otherwise.

I have structured this article to begin with methodological issues, then the spatial-temporal context of Nabongo Mumia’s response to colonial entrenchment in the region, and emphasizing the disconnection in perception of crucial issues between Nabongo Mumia and the colonial agents. Lastly, I look at how descendants of the Wanga Kingdom have reinvented the image and memory of Nabongo Mumia in order to accord him a clearer image in the on-going national struggle for historical spaces.

On Methodology

I am largely guided by the counter-revisionist approach⁴ to reading history – an approach that acknowledges the silences that were perhaps necessary in the immediate post-independence era so as to counter the categorization of Africans as either absolutely ‘resisters’ or ‘collaborators’. If the logic of narrating the anti-colonial struggles in Kenya – as indeed in the former colonies generally – was in part to celebrate the valour of those who sacrificed life and limb for freedom, such narratives were never complete without a round vilification of fellow compatriots who chose alternative ways of voicing their discontent with colonialism and its structures. Subsequently, the

template of heroism was instituted into which key figures were inserted and given voice, while their antagonists and broadly those with alternative views and responses remained frozen and muted in the image of collaboration. Such a reading may have served immediate scholarly needs and was indeed consistent with the Pan-Africanist spirit of the time. But it ignored what has become increasingly clear with time – the simple fact that independence was achieved with the help of changing global political economy and events as much as and perhaps more than local nationalist agitations. Yet, the unsympathetic presentation of ‘collaborators’ was neither most dominant nor confined to historical discourses; it was also quite common in literary texts, notably in Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s works. Eschewing the tendency to read history in linear terms then, revisionist and counter-revisionist approaches acknowledge and indeed appreciate the complexity of history by removing it from the logic of causality, and instead understanding the multiple ways in which fluidity disturbs simple notions of the past as representing some truths. In a sense, this approach is deconstructive of the various orthodoxies, both in fact and approaches, of what already exists. In the words of Terry Eagleton (1986: 80) to deconstruct, then ‘is to *reinscribe* and *resituate meanings*, events and objects within broader movements and structures; it is, so to speak, to reverse the imposing tapestry in order to expose in all its unglamorously dishevelled tangle of threads constituting the well heeled image it presents to the world’.⁵ Re-reading the place of historical figures as Nabongo Mumia in this paper is then a truly deconstructive venture, meant to disturb historical and other hidden ideological structures that have for long been presented as orthodoxies.

Rather than solely reading the existing written archive, I supplement it with oral sources. I am guided by the Vansinian idea of orality as a source of history, which is why interviews with Nabongo Mumia’s descendants would be important in helping fill in the lacunae. Jan Vansina (1985) distinguishes between ‘oral history’ – a verbal transference of a historical deed that took place within the lifespan of a people of the generation – from ‘oral tradition’, which is a verbal transference beyond the generation in which the deed occurred, provided it can be traced to the original, initial speaker or observer (196). Hence, an interview with descendants of Nabongo Mumia has value as a source of historical evidence because it reveals levels of historical consciousness in the group concerned.⁶ This distinction is important for us because it affirms the links of narration between the time of an event’s occurrence and its recording. It is also critical that though such sources may pass as subjective, such a weakness is not always automatic, nor is the whole method without benefit. Indeed as Vansina further asserts, ‘[o]ne cannot emphasise enough, however, that such sources are irreplaceable, not

only because information would otherwise be lost, but because they are sources "from the inside" (197). 'Incendiarism', then is a form of authority where such data are concerned, which means the descendants of Nabongo Mumia are important because of the insider value of their responses.

Enlisting 'oral traditions' as a source of history liberates us from the handicap of having to rely entirely on the written word that was exclusively created by foreigners in every sense of the word. 'Writings by foreigners or by outsiders', Vansina argues, 'have their own biases. They select their own topics of interest, which they follow in *attributing various activities and qualities to the populations they describe, and their interpretations are shaped through their biases*'⁷ (197). It is the awareness of this malleability of narration and interpretation of historical occurrences that informs the reinvention of Nabongo Mumia's history and memory by his descendants and the counter-revisionist reading of his image in existing literature by this scholar.

Placing Nabongo Mumia's Response to Colonialism in Spatial-Temporal Context

Nabongo Mumia was born around 1849, and took over leadership from his father, Nabongo Shiundu, upon the latter's death in 1882. Mumia was able to reign and rule over the Wanga people, with some unverifiable accounts suggesting that occasionally his territory went beyond this to include the entire Luhya nation, with varying degrees of influence up to 1949 when he died. The Wanga people were relatively few, but had the fortune of having had an earlier exposure to the outside world of Arab and Swahili cultures. Records indicate that after the mid-nineteenth century, the place we now know as Mumias emerged as an active and important contact zone for traders and local people.⁸ Formerly known as Elureko, the place was, in the words of Kenyanchui (1992: 28), 'a meeting centre for the caravans of Arabs, Swahili and European traders'. The abundance of food in the neighbouring Nandi Escarpment regions made Mumias an apt market centre, which was made even bigger when it was made an administrative post by the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEACo). In terms of political organization, Mumias was the capital of the larger Wanga Kingdom that was the closest to a centralized state, as we know it today, under the leadership of a King, or Nabongo. Traditionally, these kings had been friendly and quite accommodating to foreign travellers and traders. As Hobley writes, '[t]he Chief Mumia had always been friendly, first to traders, later to the I.B.E.A. Co., and then to the [British colonial] Government'.⁹ Nabongo's first-hand experience with the three most important agents of change in the later nineteenth century, long distance traders, the I.B.E.A Co and the colonial agents,

not only bequeathed him with a fore-knowledge of the changes that were sweeping across the region, but also the possibility of appropriating their influence for his own benefit. As Were (1967: 163) further notes, '[a]lready, he was fully aware of the efficacy of modern firearms. By befriending the British, he thereby hoped to strengthen and consolidate his position and state at the expense of his traditional enemies'. Could his knowledge 'of the efficacy of modern firearms', especially what the latter were used to do in the neighbouring communities that 'resisted', have been a dominant influence on his decision to 'collaborate'?

For instance, Were writes that '[t]he Babukusu put forth strong resistance which was overcome by the superior arms (which included one maxim gun) and numbers of the invaders [150 Soudanese soldiers and about 900 armed Wanga volunteers] [...] As against this, about four hundred and twenty Babukusu were killed, several of them wounded and captured, and about four hundred and fifty cattle captured' (167). The bloody expedition was overwhelming both in numbers of casualties and in the ruthlessness of their execution. This seems to be the rediscovery now emerging that, contrary to the apparent orthodoxy of colonialist benevolence and self-defensive military responses to attacks by local African communities during the early hazy days of colonial imposition, the colonial agents could indeed annihilate entire villages.¹⁰

Yet, it would appear that the Wanga Kingdom increasingly came under siege as the nineteenth century wore on, particularly from immediate neighbours, subjecting the political position of Nabongo to real threats. As Kenyanchui (1992: 28) writes,

[t]he relationship between Abawanga and their neighbours deteriorated in the course of the 19th century, and on the eve of British colonial rule, the Kingdom was at breaking point. In 1892, the Kager Luo renewed with vigour their territorial expansion. In the same year, Arabs, Swahili and Baluchi wanted to expand trade in ivory (in Suk and Karamoja) and slaves (in Bukusu). On the other hand, the Maasai wanted to intensify cattle-raids among the neighbours of Abawanga. The political position of the Nabongo was precarious.

The foregoing quotation clarifies the position Nabongo Mumia was in when he made that decision. It is correct therefore to state that as far as politics goes, there was little trust between Nabongo Mumia particularly and the Abawanga generally and the neighbouring communities. The threats came from all directions contiguous to the Wanga Kingdom, making it difficult for them to feel secure, or even share in the same thought patterns as their neighbours.

The animosity between the Abawanga and their neighbours logically would lead to an attempt by each group at allying themselves with whoever promised to buttress their political and military standing. But what the Wanga King did not comprehend was that the initial British interest in Nabongo Mumia and the entire land over which he ruled, was secondary to the older and more important interest in Uganda. Hence, from the outset, the colonial agents only perceived Nabongo Mumia and the people he represented in terms of how they could be made to fit into the larger scheme of exploiting Uganda. What is equally important was that by the close of the nineteenth century, there were no clear boundaries that demarcated Uganda from Kenya. In a sense then, what we now call Mumias was seen as part of Uganda. At any rate, the political organization of the Nabongoship was more like the Kabaka's in Uganda than it was of the immediate neighbouring communities, particularly the Babukusu and the Abanyala. Clear boundary changes only came into being in 1902, when 'Eastern Province was transferred to the East African Protectorate, which was later renamed Kenya' (Kenyanhui, 29). It was after the 1902 boundary changes that the role of Nabongo Mumia became more definite: he would be employed as an agent of British Indirect Rule policy. Indeed, the British set out deliberately to use the likes of Nabongo Mumia and Odera Kang'o to ensure the success of the policy. As Bruce Berman (1990: 53) notes, 'the conversion of sporadic African collaborators into a relatively permanent subordinate administrative cadre as the actual agents of local control was necessary. They would have to accept the handful of the white prefects as the sole source of authority and exclusive intermediaries with the larger political and economic structures of the economy'.

Clearly, the relationship that obtained between Nabongo Mumia and his agents on the one hand and colonial officials on the other was symbiotic. Whereas the colonial agents who enlisted Nabongo Mumia thought they were doing it for the benefit of the British colonialist system, Nabongo's own acceptance was informed by his personal and communal interest in saving the community against threats posed by neighbouring communities. As Were has written, '[f]or all that, Mumia never regarded himself as a servant of the Government but, rather, as an independent ruler acting in his own interest and that of his people. Even to the local people all over Baluyia, this is the picture he created; whenever headmen or chiefs were appointed, he was believed to have been responsible for it, not the Government' (163).

The relationship between the two representatives of power – the traditional hereditary power of Nabongo and the new colonial power of the British – was based on half-truths and self-serving interests that transcended the

personalities of the immediate representatives. If the colonial agents acted for and on behalf of the Government, so did Nabongo Mumia, '[s]o that in the eyes of the great majority of the Abaluhya, it was the Government which was in the service of Mumia and not vice versa' (Were, 164). Hence, the entanglement of conviviality between Nabongo Mumia and the subjects that he represented on the one hand, and the colonial faces like Hobley on the other hand, was in important ways an antecedent to later analyses of the relationship. There is a possible interface in the logic of Nabongo's 'collaboration' with 'colonial 'domination', meeting at the point of self and communal interest rather than the former's supposed love for the colonial system represented by the latter, as insinuated in post-independence literature on colonial Kenya. By the strength of its argument, I am inclined to draw on Achille Mbembe's (2001) analysis of the relationship that exists between the African postcolonial regime and its subjects. '[T]he postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration, but can best be characterized as convivial, a relationship fraught by the fact of the *commandement* and its "subjects" having to share the same living space' (104). Likewise one can refer to Frantz Fanon's (1965) celebrated analysis of how power changed hands from colonial to the early post-colonial leadership. The latter did not lead the newly independent countries to developing a truly complete national consciousness, but instead inherited the reins of power still stuck in the groove of tribalism, cronyism and the like. Hence, the relationship between a majority of the citizens and their respective states was one of tension, at once desiring to follow the rhetoric of nationalism as they remained alive to the pitfalls of such a pursuit. This ambivalence of independence – marking the end to forced labour, corporal punishment and overt racism, as well as a realization that economic and political structures put in place by colonialism remained largely unchanged – has recently necessitated a change in the mode of analysing the African situation. This is clearly the idea of Frederick Cooper (2002), which 'cuts across the conventional dividing point between colonial and post-colonial African history, a division which conceals as much as it reveals. Focusing on such a dividing point either makes the break seem too neat – as if colonialism was turned off like a light switch – or suggests too much continuity, positing continued Western dominance of the world economy and the continued presence in African states of "western" as a mere change in personnel within a structure of power that remains colonial' (4). This paper situates itself within this context in the sense that the failure of post-independence Kenyan regimes to blunt Kenyans' sensibilities to 'tribe' as a form of social organization has made it impossible for the descendants of Nabongo Mumia's Wanga Kingdom

to attract a favourable reading. Nor have the Kenyan elite pointed out precisely when Nabongo stopped ‘collaborating’ with foreign powers.

Nabongo’s Relationship with Colonialists: Alliance or Collaboration?

We see thus that a long history of contact with the outside world, increasing threats to the Wanga Kingdom by neighbouring communities, and the dubious misinformation by colonial agents, were some important factors that led Nabongo Mumia take a path that has since been summed up as collaboration. What can be condensed out of all these is that to ‘collaborate’ or to ‘resist’ were decisions that were premised on circumstances. In a somewhat different context, Godwin Murunga (2000) refers to Adu Boahen’s *UNESCO General History of Africa Volume VII: Africa under Colonial Domination 1880-1935*, in which Boahen ‘problematizes the idea of resistance, demonstrating that it cannot be seen as the polar side of collaboration’. Indeed Murunga further adds that ‘[h]istorically, the alliances built between Nabongo Mumia of the Wanga and the British, for instance, were, in their own way, modes of resistance, call them passive resistance if you wish. Indeed, those who resisted at other times collaborated and vice versa’ (97). Thus some historians perceive the role of pragmatism in leaders’ decisions. Elisha Atieno-Odhiambo (2002) illustrates this point using Kenyatta’s turn-around when he saw real prospects of assuming power in post-independence Kenya. After years of colonial vilification and incarceration, Kenyatta changed tune from ‘the white man must go’ to ‘please remain around and farm’. Atieno-Odhiambo writes, ‘[i]n 1962 the settlers, realizing the inevitability of the transfer of state power, recaptured Kenyatta and made him guarantee them a safe future. At an anxious moment Kenyatta reassured the assembled settlers in Nakuru in August of 1964 that he would respect and honour their property rights in land....’ (239). This capitulation on the part of Kenyatta was taken badly by some of the Mau Mau veterans, who saw it as an act of betrayal. Atieno-Odhiambo further writes that indeed some of these veterans revisited the forest with intent to fight back. But the point is that when it suited Kenyatta, he ‘worked with’ the colonial masters. Whether this was ‘collaboration’ or not remains a valid, if sterile, question. If no leader was insulated from these colonial machinations, what is the valid basis of tagging some leaders as ‘collaborators’ and others as ‘resisters’?

This seems to be the position of Nabongo’s descendants, who argue that the label of collaborator has been placed on individuals – including Nabongo Mumia – whose hospitality was abused by the whites at various moments. Fred Matianyi, for instance, argues that for Mumia, forming alliances with

visitors was a long tradition that began with his dalliance with the Maasai whose greatest contribution to the Wanga kingdom was to strengthen it militarily. Given that the Wanga population was generally low, it was always necessary for Nabongo to guard against its annihilation in war by ensuring that he had allies. It was this idea that made him welcome Arab and Swahili caravans that passed by Mumias much earlier than the whites, as well as with the Nubians and friendly Luhya ethnic communities, especially the Kisa, Marama and the Marachi. So long was this tradition of gaining allies that when eventually the whites came by, Nabongo Mumia thought he was just continuing his tradition. Unknowingly the whites had a far bigger agenda than he could comprehend. As Nabongo Peter Mumia Shitawa states, '[i]t did not occur to him [Nabongo Mumia] that he was collaborating; he thought he was extending the usual expected hospitality'.¹¹ And so the idea of collaboration as a hallmark of Nabongo's relationship with the colonial masters is not so different from the dubious idea of 'treaties' that white explorers apparently entered into with African chiefs. There was really no shared understanding between these parties, as there were differences in understanding of the motives, language and legal implications of the agreements. At any rate, Nabongo Mumia had entered into forms of understanding with foreigners before who had not sought to undermine his power base. As Ahmed Binsumeit Jamalilyl (2006: 12) writes,

Sharif Hassan Abdalla was among the pioneers who introduced Islam in Mumias, in Western Kenya and then into Uganda. The Tribal Chief of Mumias, Chief Nabongo Mumia who was impressed by Sharif Hassan and [embraced] Islam together with his three brothers (Kadima, Mulama and Murunga), and a good number of his subjects and members of his cabinet. It is noteworthy that most of the Muslims who settled in the interior had gone there with no wives, and most of them subsequently got married to the local women. Such spirit of real integration was one of the factors, which contributed to the early conversion of the local people into Islam. The Muslim traders did not have hidden political agenda, and did not have political control over the African states. Their expertise in different fields such as herbal medicine, navigation, literature, architecture, handcraft, commerce, etc was for the service of the communities they were living in. They were mainly used as technical advisors in their respective field of specializations. They did not have nor did they seek political power.

It seems reasonable that Nabongo Mumia did not expect that the new batch of visitors that he welcomed would behave any different from their Muslim counterparts. He saw only potential benefits rather than potential threats to his authority and his people.

Hence, it may well be true to state that Nabongo Mumia was in a sense a victim of a tradition of hospitality and, later, of global changes. He inherited a throne that celebrated hospitality as a virtue to be espoused by a leader; his entire kingdom traversed lands that were fertile, climatically rich and inhabited by a friendly people with abundant food, and which had a long history of facilitating passage to other places, notably the present day Uganda. Nabongo Mumia further presided over a centralized system of governance that had, among other attributes, tamper-proof structures of checks and balances, particularly in the supreme organ of the council of elders. His choice was thus only personal to a rather limited extent, but largely circumstantial. I am inclined to agree with Were's conclusion that 'it is quite conceivable that if the British had established their center in some other place, say Bukusu, Nabongo Mumia and his people would have adopted a different policy towards them and that the local Babukusu would have been the collaborators rather than resisters'.¹ (186). My view is that Nabongo's decision at that time was therefore a political strategy of camouflage that appeared to accommodate the imperial will, even though the motive could have been to protect his people against colonial violence. It was also consistent with his personal political schemes of the moment, even though based on his limited exposure to the cunning ways of the white men. That is the way his descendants remember him.

Remembering Nabongo Mumia Post-2000: The Nabongo Cultural Centre

Having died in 1949 at around 100 years of age, the person of Nabongo Mumia continues to occupy the minds and souls of his descendants in the wider Mumias area, appropriately named after him. From 2000, some of these descendants came together to find ways of ensuring that the memory of Nabongo Mumia was preserved for the benefit of posterity.¹² The outcomes of this initiative were two: first, the formation of the Nabongo Welfare Society (NWS) whose membership was initially drawn from among Nabongo Mumia's grandchildren, but later expanded to include any willing Luhya. Secondly, the NWS approached the Mumias Sugar Company (MSC) management for support in starting a centre that would be a tribute to Nabongo Mumia, whose jurisdiction had traversed much of the MSC's land now under cane cultivation. While the then Managing Director Evans Kidero accepted, the matter was all the same referred to the Kenya Sugar Board (KSB), after which Nabongo Cultural Centre was mooted and constructed.¹³ So far, these efforts have achieved remarkable infrastructural success.

The Nabongo Cultural Centre is situated in Matungu, formerly the seat of power for Nabongo Mumia, about five kilometres from Mumias town on the Mumias-Busia highway. It sits on a seven-acre piece of land, and has three main structures that are yet to be fully completed. It is envisaged that it will have a library, a museum and a bar/canteen (the last two are almost operational). An important part of the centre is a mausoleum that was erected to preserve the burial sites of Nabongo Mumia, his father Shiundu, and that of Wamukoya, Shiundu's father. Like all the structures in the NCC, the plaques with details of where exactly each of these leaders lie buried are yet to be placed, which, according to Kennedy Inyanje, awaits the official opening of the centre by the current Prime Minister, Raila Odinga. At the time I conducted this fieldwork the proposed date for the official launch of the site was August 2008, which has long passed. Raila Odinga's coming to officiate the opening of the centre may be in tune with the recent trend where many communities wish to be associated with the courage, singular focus and determination of Raila.¹⁴ If the figure of Raila is an embodiment of courage and bravery, then his association with Nabongo by officially opening the NCC becomes a way through which Nabongo's name can also be inserted on the roll of heroes in Kenya. But it is also an attempt to trace through family trees the blood relationship that exists between the Luo of Nyanza region – to which Raila belongs – and the Nabongo Mumia's Wanga people. It is widely believed that Raila Odinga is a distant relative of the Wanga people due to Nabongo Mumia's extensive network of relatives.¹⁵ Indeed, claims that Nabongo Mumia 'had sixty-five wives, half of who were Luos'¹⁶ are commonly bandied around to buttress the blood kinship bonds that may exist between Raila and the descendants of Nabongo Mumia. The unanswered question is whether these descendants view Raila's influence in the larger western region as a continuation of Nabongo Mumia's work.

According to Mzee Wycliffe Mulama, the overriding objective of running the NCC is to create unity among all Abaluhya at home and in the Diaspora. His view is that unless such unity is nurtured, the larger Luhyia nation will continue 'being belittled' by other communities.¹⁷ It is quite clear then that the pre-colonial animosity between the Wanga and other Luhyia communities notwithstanding, there is an increased interest in fostering a unified image of the Luhyia nation that may enable them to negotiate better for the available opportunities. In order to nurture this idea of Luhyia unity, the structural organization of power within the NCC is inclusive of members from non-Wanga communities. The NCC has three positions of chairmen, in charge of culture, history and publicity, respectively. This structure is supposedly a replication of the historical organization of the Wanga kingdom, where power

was not solely resident in the figure of Nabongo, but rather spread across a spectrum of leaders who, though largely invisible, remained influential in the decisions made by Nabongo. According to the reigning Nabongo Peter Mumia Shitawa,¹⁸ the indispensable council of elders was historically (and even now) all inclusive, and acted to check the possible excesses of the Nabongo. This was the context in which decisions affecting the Wanga nation were made, and at times the council could even overrule the Nabongo, especially on weighty matters.

Accordingly, it was this structure of consultative democracy that the colonial masters found in place and which they sought to exploit. The Anglo-Wanga alliance that has been presented as ‘collaboration’ was thus a political imperative that was summoned to buttress, and was in turn buttressed by, the existing structures of governance in the pre-colonial Wanga nation. Drawing on the existing structures of socio-political organization of the Wanga Kingdom, and enlisting the military support of the British against traditional neighbouring enemies were for the British and Wanga leadership respectively mutual ‘hegemonic enterprises and instrumentalities of survival’¹⁹ that were possible in the then cultural and political economies. Hindsight can now bequeath us with these insights as we attempt to understand the sub-texts that appeared to fly in the face of reason. In fairness, it must be said that the colonial discourse of categorizing communities – through their leaders – as either rational or atavistic contributed in large measure to the subsequent projection of them as either resisters, and therefore patriotic, or collaborators. For instance, the colonial textual condemnation of the Mau Mau as barbaric and its association with the Gikuyu people has led to the often uncritical acceptance that the Gikuyu were on the forefront of Kenya's struggle for independence. Such a projection elides the role of the home-guard element among the Gikuyu people of that time, without which Mau Mau would possibly never have been defeated. In the same vein, the projection of Nabongo Mumia as a ‘collaborator’ removes him and his entire community from the roll of those who struggled for independence.

Yet, one can remotely sense a hint that Nabongo Mumia did not simply content himself with enlisting colonial assistance to shield himself and the Wanga nation against attacks from neighbouring communities. With the support of colonial authority, he later tried to extend his leadership to lord it over the neighbours, suggesting that he had in him some instincts of rudimentary expansionism. Safely backed up by the colonial machinery, Nabongo Mumia was seduced to send his agents to rule over other parts of Luhyialand, a task he undertook with commitment. Naturally, the agents met with stiff and sustained resistance in Luhyialand and wherever else such

impositions were attempted. Were (1967: 178) asserts that '[o]wing to the fact of their [Nabongo's agents] being foreigners and, in the eyes of the local people and rulers, usurpers, they were all thoroughly hated'. Further, 'the fact that some of the agents were indolent, extortionate and oppressive did not help the situation. The agents tended to be autocratic and certainly less benevolent' (181). These sentiments regarding personal weakness of individual agents were generally and unfortunately applied to all the Wanga people; while the 'thorough hatred' would spill over to the post-independence Kenya, and would metamorphose into a play of stereotypes²⁰ against the Wanga people by their cousins in the larger Luhyia nation. All these have contributed in varying degrees to the image of Nabongo Mumia as a 'collaborator' with colonialism, and partly informs the recent efforts aimed at re-reading his place in history. All these issues point to the complex nature of a person's and a group's place in the making of a nation's history.

Notes

1. *Facing Mount Kenya*, Nairobi, Kenway Publications, [1938] 1978, p. 196. Indeed, other writers have presented a similar view of the colonial agents, most notably Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *A Grain of Wheat*, where he rather unsympathetically presents the character of Karanja as one who pursued personal interests over communal ones.
2. Answers to these and other related questions could be quite interesting, though they fall beyond the ambit of this paper.
3. The debates around Masinde Muliro were so fierce that the university had to engage its best minds to counter argue for the name in what was largely accepted as a necessary 'rebranding' project. Naturally, the university would have been compelled to do so anyway had the name been changed to any other.
4. If the colonial historiography sought to paint leaders in neat categories of rebellious (therefore bad) or law abiding (therefore good), the immediate post-independence revisionism reversed the underlying interpretations, where rebellious was also nationalist and liberatory, while law-abiding was the hallmark of Quislings. With hindsight, such revisions were prone to distortions that now need clarifications.
5. My emphasis.
6. I obtained much of the information for this section during interviews with respondents around Mumias – some of them family members of the historical Nabongo Mumia. I owe huge debts of gratitude to my colleague and friend Mark Wabuli who introduced me to important contacts and further chaperoned me as I interviewed the respondents. I am also grateful to the entire staff of the Nabongo Cultural Centre, particularly Kennedy Inyanje, Nabongo Peter Mumia Shitawa (the reigning Nabongo and grandson to Nabongo Mumia), Mzee Wycliffe Mulama (the Chairman of Nabongo Welfare Society) and Mzee Philip Matiany, all who gladly agreed to answer my questions at short notice. As I thank each one of them, I take responsibility for whatever infelicities that may be in this paper.
7. My emphasis.

8. Here I echo Mary Louise Pratt's phrase in *Imperial Writing: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London & New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 4.
9. Cited in Gideon S. Were, *A History of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya c. 1500 - 1930*, East African Publishing House, Nairobi, 1967. p. 162.
10. Indeed, the question of colonial violence has re-emerged in the recent scholarship on colonial operations in Kenya, especially during the years of the Mau Mau war. See for instance Caroline Elkins, *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2005. Much earlier, writers had captured the absurdity of colonialist instrumentalisation of violence in pursuit of its economic objectives, projecting it as not discriminating between those who supported the system and these who opposed it. See Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Weep Not, Child*, Heinemann Educational Books, Nairobi, 1964, and *A Grain of Wheat*, Heinemann Educational Books, Nairobi, 1986.
11. A brief anecdote on the essence of hospitality as part of the philosophy of the Wanga people and expectations of their leaders may help place Nabongo Mumia's obsession with hospitality into a clearer context. According to the current Nabongo Patrick Mumia, in the family history of Nabongo Mumia, one of them, Chitechi, had been deposed by the council of elders who deemed him too selfish to be a leader, and replaced him with Osundwa. In the order of Netya – (Chitechi) Osundwa – Wamukoya – Shiundu – Mumia. Therefore, Mumia remained alive to the threats against his authority by the council of elders, and tried very much to remain hospitable to visitors as a way of securing his own position.
12. Such efforts have sought to remember the entire leadership of the Wanga Kingdom, placing Nabongo only as one of those whose reign coincided with colonialism in Kenya.
13. This is according to Mzee Wycliffe Mulama, in an interview with this author.
14. I have in mind the sense in which over time, it has become increasingly difficult to pigeon-hole Raila Odinga with the pejorative term of 'tribal chief' as was the case in the early 1990s. Currently, many people are beginning to view Raila as a charismatic and pragmatic leader with a national appeal. One leading example of his stature comes from his decision to share power with Kibaki even after the latter was controversially sworn in after an election many believe Raila won with a big margin. Indeed, this decision made him perhaps the most important Kenyan politician.
15. Claims of blood relations between Raila and the Wanga people are mutual, but hard to verify. During one of the anti-draft constitution campaigns in November 2005, this author was present at a public rally where Raila appealed to his 'relatives' not to abandon him, and instead reject the constitution. And in the 2007 elections, virtually all the people around Mumias and the larger region affiliated themselves with Raila Odinga because he was perceived as one of them, an idea supported demographically by a huge Luo presence in the region.
16. Philip Matianyi, in an interview with this author in Mumias town, on 13th July 2008.
17. Interview with the author conducted at the NCC, on 13th July 2008.
18. In an interview with this author at the NCC on 13th July 2008.

19. This is Atieno-Odhiambo's phrase that he uses in a somewhat related context. See 'Hegemonic Enterprises and Instrumentalities of Survival: Ethnicity and Democracy in Kenya', *African Studies*, 61, 2, 2002, pp. 223-249.
20. Indeed stereotypes were, as I intimate throughout this paper, quite effective tools of a divisive colonial governance in the country.

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