Chapter 5

State Formation in East Africa

Key words
• centralized
• decentralized
• states
• stateless
• clans

<table>
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<th>Learning Outcomes</th>
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<td>By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:</td>
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<td>• understand the centralized and the non-centralized states in East Africa.</td>
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<td>• know the characteristics of centralized and the non-centralized societies in East Africa.</td>
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<td>• understand the distinction between the centralized and non-centralised states in East Africa.</td>
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Introduction
After studying this chapter, you should be able to explain the organisational features and processes of centralized and non-centralised states in East Africa.

Pre-colonial societies existed in two forms, i.e. centralized and non-centralised, also known as decentralised. While centralized societies had one leader at the top, non-centralised ones had many leaders, each heading a clan.

Formation of Pre-Colonial Societies
Before the coming of Europeans to our indigenous communities, we were organised at family level, based on clan connections and in tribal settings. This was due to blood kinship ties that existed from our ancestral lineages. However, as a result of migration and settlement, communities began to define boundaries in order to keep resources for their own use and for the purpose of governance. This took the form of societies defending their ancestral lands and cultural heritage.

With the rise of this local politics, a number of communities began to define their leadership destinies as centralised and non-centralised societies. As many scholars and other sources of history have shown, many communities in East Africa copied the leadership style and method of governance from the Bachwezi, who were one of the earliest civilized societies in the interlacustrine region of East Africa.

Activity 5.1: Selection of case studies

1. In pairs, list any four centralised societies.
2. Using the brainstorm method, list any four non-centralised societies in East Africa.
3. In groups, make a comparison between the features of the centralised and the non-centralised societies in East Africa.

Non-Centralised Societies
Societies in East Africa were also organised on the basis of clans. Societies of this kind are called non-centralised societies. These societies were scattered in nature, with a loose grouping of administrative units, each headed by a clan leader. The selection of leaders in these societies was largely based on age, wisdom, bravery and social standing. Economic activities were purely communal as labour, children, land, cattle and trade items were shared. One of the outstanding features was the age set system, i.e. the senior age grade and the
junior age system. Transition into another age grade was done through an initiation ceremony that was commonly carried out at the age of 18 years in most decentralised societies. In East Africa, the key non-centralised societies included the Maasai, Chagga, Kikuyu, Nyamwezi and Acholi.

Nyamwezi Society

Background

Various communities, commonly described as Wanyamwezi, were by the early 19th century inhabiting the rolling plateaus of central Tanganyika. Nyamwezi society was mainly organised basing on a number of small communities or chiefdoms throughout the first half of the 19th century. However, during the second half of the 19th century, larger political units were formed. By the time European colonial rule was imposed, Nyamwezi social, political and economic institutions had been greatly transformed. Most of the transformation was initiated and carried out by Mirambo, who developed Nyamwezi society into a more or less centralised society with some outstanding characteristics of a kingdom. For example, its political or administrative system was highly centralised, characterised by autocracy, bureaucracy and trade, and the economy was centrally controlled and coordinated by Mirambo.

Besides, Mirambo had evolved a strong standing army of Ruga-ruga, which terrorised western and central Tanganyika. In fact, the Ruga-ruga performed the functions of the armies in the pre-colonial African kingdoms, i.e. territorial acquisition, territorial defence, putting down internal rebellions, raiding for trade items and escorting long-distance trade caravans. However, in spite of these tremendous developments, the society remained egalitarian or stateless, chiefly because taking on power was not hereditary. In fact, Mirambo did not complete the transformation of the empire before he died. Then the empire began to crumble and eventually collapsed.

Political organization

In the pre-colonial era, the Nyamwezi were organised into a number of small and autonomous chiefdoms ruled by chiefs, whom they called watemi, or ntemi in the singular. However, by 1870s in the reign of Mirambo, the society was more or less centralised, with the powers of all watemi reduced by Mirambo.

Previously, the ntemi was the political and religious leader as well in his chiefdom. The ntemi formulated the major policies and took decisions such as declaring war or concluding peace after seeking the advice of his council of elders.

Apart from the council of elders, the ntemi had a hierarchy of palace officials. These included the mugawe (chief councillor), the mteko (army leader) and kikoma (junior army leader) and the information officer, who was usually armed with a copper spear and travelled around the kingdom announcing the ntemi's orders.

The ntemi's effective judicial functions included settling disagreements in his chiefdom. He handled cases such as murder, witchcraft and treason.

The ntemi's effective rule mainly covered his capital and a few settlements (gungulis) surrounding him. The chiefdom was divided into gungulis ruled by the ntemi's retired palace officials or by
persons otherwise appointed by the ntemi.

The gunguli leaders were responsible for the day-to-day administration of their areas, collected tribute, organised the cultivation of the ntemi’s farms and raised armies to assist the ntemi in case of war.

The political enlargement of Nyamwezi land took place in the 1870s through Mirambo’s and Nyungu-ya-Mawe’s efforts. These Nyamwezi rulers forged “kingdoms” out of various chiefdoms. For example, Mirambo started out as the ruler of a small Ugowe chiefdom but later annexed his mother’s neighbouring territory of Uliankuru. By 1880, he had created Urambo, which was more or less a state, using Ruga-ruga mercenaries. In a similar way, Nyungu-ya-Mawe formed Ukimbuu state using Maviti soldiers.

Social organisation

The various Nyamwezi chiefdoms were bound together basing on kingship ties. These chiefdoms believed in common historical experiences, such as migration from a common centre.

The ntemi was recognised as the most senior leader and the senior ntemi would give ritual blessings to the newly installed ntemi.

In general, every ntemi was regarded as a ritual leader. In case of prolonged drought, it was his duty to mediate with the ancestors and offer sacrifices to the gods to make rain. Even before his army went to war, he performed some rituals.

The “MgonWalhanga” (ntemi’s wife) also took an active part in the ntemi’s ritual activities.

The society of medicine men and diviners (ufumu) was also represented at the installation and burial of the ntemi and at other ritual ceremonies.

The ntemi was believed to have power over life and death. In fact, everyone prayed for the well-being of the ntemi since it was believed that the ntemi’s sickness also affected the health of plants and animals.
Economic organization

The economy was under the control of the *ntemi*. For example, he guided his subjects in crop cultivation. He maintained what may be referred to as a national grain reserve. This was made up of produce from his personal farm, the tribute in grain paid to him by every adult in his chiefdom and the harvest from the farm cultivated in his name in every *gunguli*. He also kept large herds of cattle, goats and sheep.

Apart from the above, the Nyamwezi were active participants in pre-colonial trade. They actively participated in long-distance trade between the East African interior and the coast. They played the role of middlemen, especially from the 1840s, between the coastal traders and the East African interior communities.

During the second half of the 19th century, several Nyamwezi chiefs and successful traders organised caravans to and from the coast. They followed caravan routes along which there were major commercial centres. The Nyamwezi dominated the central route at the climax of long-distance trade, chiefly supplying slaves. The major trade items supplied to the coastal traders included, among others, ivory, copper and slaves. This was in exchange for foreign goods, e.g. clothes, beads, ammunition, glassware etc.

In conclusion, Nyamwezi society had by the colonial era evolved into a large political unit that was more or less a kingdom. However, no central authority had emerged to bring together all the Nyamwezi people into one centralised political unit. It was, therefore, still a segmentary society. Subsequently, like any other pre-colonial African society in Tanganyika, Nyamwezi was subjected to German colonial rule in the last quarter of the 19th century.

Activity 5.2: Features of stateless societies

1. Using ICT or library research, describe the organisation of Maasai, Chagga, Acholi and Kikuyu societies.

2. Draw a map of East Africa and on it locate these selected societies.

3. In Table 1 below, draw a distinction between the features of centralised and non-centralised societies.
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### Bachwezi Dynasty

According to oral tradition, the Batembuzi were the founders of the Bunyoro Kingdom. There are a lot of myths, mysticism and legends about the Batembuzi in connection with the Chwezi Empire. They are believed to have been gods that came from heaven. There is very little agreement among historians regarding the Batembuzi period in history, even about the names and successive order of individual kings.

According to oral tradition, the Batembuzi gods saw that their grandson was in danger. They magically made the walls of the cave in which they lived grow tens of breasts, dripping with milk enough to feed all the babies in the kingdom. These breasts came to be known as Amabere ga Nyinamwiru, translated as Nyinamwiru’s breasts. The baby boy was thus saved. The boy remained hidden for years, feeding on the endless supply of milk in the cave. He grew big and strong, and as handsome as his father. Soon he was able to leave the cave and join other youth his age.

The culture and pride of the Chwezi and Batembuzi Empire were based on Amabere ga Nyinamwiru (karstscenery).

### Political organization

Politically, the Chwezi were organised under one central authority that had replaced the clan-based system of the original inhabitants of the region, who were Bantu. The king, who carried the title Omukama, was the head, with absolute powers. He was also the fountain of the judicial system with a chain of representatives. The kingdom was divided into smaller provinces, counties and sub-counties, each under a chief. The representative of the Omukama in each province formed a council of representatives selected mainly from close relatives of the Omukama. BigobyaMugenyi was the capital of the Chwezi state. This fact is based on the big number of cattle and human bones, iron implements and remains of pottery found there.

It is assumed that the Chwezi rulers lived in reed palaces, with palace officials, women and slave artisans. These palaces were protected by enclosures known as ebirembo. The political head of the Chwezi had a large standing army that fought with spears. They also dug ditches around the capital and kraals for purposes of protection. The Chwezi had royal regalia that consisted of spears, stools, drums and crowns. These were symbols of power and were respected by everyone.
Social organization

Socially, the Chwezi built grass-thatched huts smeared with cow dung and decorated inside with a variety of handicrafts. They were great sportsmen who spent their free time playing the board games omweso and enziga and wrestling. They were also interested in gymnastics and long-distance races. They were great hunters who used long spears and built reed palaces for their kings to live in. The occupation one did decided one’s social class, and the Iru were the cultivators and subjects of the Hima, who were pastoralists and the rulers. The Chwezi also had the institution of palace officials, royal women and slave artisans who assisted the omukama in the daily running of the empire. Regarding religion, they believed in many gods, had strange and miraculous powers, could perform miracles using witchcraft and could disappear when annoyed.
Economic organization

The Bachwezi were a pastoral group of people who prized long-horned cattle from which they got milk, hides and meat as their means of survival. They grew coffee, beans and millet. They also involved themselves in pottery and made round bowls, jars and shallow basins and decorated dishes. They also carried out ironworking and made iron items like hoes, pangas (machetes) and spears. The idea of basket weaving was among their innovations and inventions. The bark-cloth industry also formed part of their economy. They also made cowhide sandals and engaged in salt mining. In addition, they engaged in barter trade, exchanging iron implements and salt for food with their neighbours.

Figure 5.4: Nakayima tree, where the mighty sorceress is believed to reside

Activity 5.3 : Chwezi Empire

1. Read the story above and in your notebook briefly describe the origins of the Chwezi Empire.
2. In groups, write brief notes describing the importance of the above photographs in the history of the Chwezi Empire.
3. Using the library, identify the significance of Chwezi civilisation for the peoples of the Interlacustrine region.
4. In a guided discovery, discuss and take a note of the organisation of Bunyoro Kitara Kingdom.
Centralised States
Despite the high number of decentralised communities in East Africa in the 19th century, there existed a few that were centralised. Examples include Buganda, Ankole and Toro, among others.

Buganda Kingdom
- These were a Bantu speaking people of the Buganda Kingdom in Uganda. The Buganda Chiefdom had emerged as early as 140 AD as a subject state of the Bunyoro-Kitara Kingdom.
- The counties of Busiro, Kyaddondo and Mawokota were the centre of the kingdom. Traditional also states that the first king and creator of the Buganda Kingdom was Kintu, who came from the east around the Mount Elgon region. It is believed he entered Buganda with 13 clans.
- Other theories attribute Buganda’s origin to the Luo. These theories hold that Kimera Kato, a brother of Isingoma Mpuga Rukidi, the founder of the Luo-Babitodynasty in Bunyoro, was the founder of Buganda. It is also probable that Buganda might have been one of the many kingdoms founded by the Bachwezi – the demi-gods.
- Other clans of Buganda are believed to have come from the Ssese Islands.
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**Factors that led to the growth of Buganda Kingdom**

1. Good, strong and able leaders like Kkyabagu, Junjuand Suna etc., who propelled the kingdom to prosperity by uniting the people and restructuring the existing administrative system.
2. Buganda was a small and compact kingdom and, therefore, easy to manage. Other kingdoms, like Bunyoro-Kitara, were too large and had a class system.
3. Its strategic location in a defensible position in the lake region was of great advantage over its rivals, Toro and Bunyoro. It lay next to Lake Victoria, giving it defense, communication and transport advantages. To the east were the small states of Toro and Ankole, that posed no threat.
4. A good climate and fertile soils in the region enabled the successful growing of bananas, the staple crop of the Baganda.
5. Contact with the Waswahili enabled the kingdom to gain riches and weapons/guns.
6. The kingdom had a strong loyal army to defend it from its warring neighbours. The *kabaka* even possessed a royal navy that kept guard over Lake Victoria.
7. The existence of a centralised government made the kingdom cohesive.
8. The Ganda traditions that allowed the *kabaka* to marry from every clan as a means of ensuring unity.
9. The traditional system of labour organisation which demanded that farming be done by women while the men were involved in other activities, such as politics, carpentry, war, bark-cloth making and smithing.
10. The wars of conquest, which finally led to Buganda’s expansion.

**How the Buganda Kingdom was governed**

1. The Buganda Kingdom had a highly centralised monarchy under the *Kabaka*, who enjoyed absolute power. His position was hereditary.
2. The *Kabaka*’s Court was the nerve centre of the Baganda community. All symbols of royal authority were kept in the court, e.g. the throne (*Namulondo*), royal drums, spears and stools.
3. The *Kabaka* was the political leader of the Buganda Kingdom. He was the head of the traditional religion – *Lubaale* –, where he was the chief priest. He was the judicial head and the final court of appeal/he was the supreme judge. He was also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces.
4. He controlled trade.
5. The capital of the kingdom was at Mengo, where the palace, Lubiri, was situated.
6. The *Kabaka* appointed senior government officials and dismissed them when the need arose. For example, he appointed the katikiro (prime minister), the omulamuzi (chief justice) and the omuwanika (treasurer), who assisted him in administration. He also appointed the mugema (the senior-most chief among the bataka), the musenero (the chief butler) and the mfumbiro (the chief baker).
7. The katikiro was in charge of organising tax collection and public works. He planned wars in the *Kabaka*’s name. He had to protect the *kabaka* during war. He was responsible for informing the *Kabaka* of the decisions he made on court issues.
8. Below him were the omulamuzi (chief justice) and omuwanika (treasurer), who were directly
responsible to the kabaka.

ix) The bataka were minor chiefs in charge of clans, and who guarded the land, collected taxes, carried out conscription into the army and presented page boys to the Kabaka.

x) Peasants served under chiefs and were required to fight in wars. Slaves (badu) served the king and chiefs in their homesteads. Pages and bagalagala (sons of chiefs and other nobles) served the Kabaka, too.

xi) To ensure unity, the Kabaka married from the principal clans.

xii) There was a Lukiko which advised the Kabaka and was the final court. It comprised 69 members who were nominated by the Kabaka (and the positions they held were not hereditary). It made laws and debated issues concerning the kingdom. It also directed tax collection and planned expenditure, it acted as the final court of appeal, and it represented the needs of the people to the Kabaka. It helped the Kabaka in general administration. It also checked the activities of government.

Political organization

The kingdom was divided into counties (ssaza) and sub-counties (gombolola). Each county was placed under a ssaza chief whose position was hereditary initially before the Kabaka began to appoint the chiefs as a means of making them accountable. Each ssaza was divided into gombololas, each headed by a gombolola chief, who maintained law and order and collected taxes.

- The gombololas were further divided into smaller sub-divisions called miluka, each under a miluka chief. The miluka was divided into kisoko.
- The smallest administrative unit among the Baganda was the village council.
- The abatongole, appointed by the kabaka, governed the vassal states.

Social organisation of the Buganda Kingdom

- The kingdom was divided into social classes, with the royal family occupying the top of the hierarchy, then the ruling class, and then the chiefs who ruled over the peasants or commoners, known as bakopi.
- At the bottom of the social class were the slaves (badu) who were acquired mainly through raids on neighbouring communities such as Busoga, Toro and Bunyoro.
- The Baganda believed in the existence of many gods, who included:
  i) Katonda, God the creator, whose home was in heaven. Prayers were offered to him every morning and were conducted by the head of the homestead.
  ii) Kibuuka, the god of war and thunder.
  iii) Mukasa, the goddess of fertility, who was worshipped so that he could bless the nation with more children, livestock and bumper harvests.
  iv) Kiwanuka, the god of lightning.
  v) Nawagenyi, the goddess of drought.
- The community also believed in the existence of ancestral spirits, whose main responsibility was to maintain discipline in the clans since the spirits were believed to limit their influence to close
relatives. Balubaale were the spirits of people who had supernatural powers and were consulted through prophets or mediums.

- The Baganda had religious leaders, led by the Kabaka, followed by the mediums, prophets and medicine people.
- There also existed sorcerers called balogo, who were feared since they could cause harm to people.
- The traditional religion of the Baganda was, however, greatly undermined by the influx of the Waswahili and Arab Muslims into the community in the 19th century.
- Ganda society was polygamous. For example, the Kabaka was required to marry from all Ganda clans to maintain links in the society.
- There was division of labour based on sex. Women tilled the land while men engaged in warfare, built houses, and made clothes from barkcloth.
- As a form of rite of passage, the Baganda went through formal education that trained them in their rites.

**Economic organisation**

1. Buganda’s economy was based on agriculture and the production of bananas (matoke), a staple food.
2. The Baganda also kept large herds of livestock. The Bahima looked after the Kabaka’s sherds. From the livestock, they obtained milk and meat to supplement their diet.
3. The Baganda conducted raids on their neighbours like the Buddu, Basoga and Kyaggwe through which they acquired slaves, livestock and ivory.
4. There was division of labour. Women worked in the fields while men were involved in road construction, making bark cloth, smithing and war.
5. The kingdom was deeply involved in local, regional and international trade. The Baganda exchanged bark cloth and beans for cattle from their neighbours. They exchanged slaves and hides for guns, glassware and cotton cloth from coastal traders.
6. The Baganda practised ironworking, producing hoes for cultivation and weapons for defense. Some of these items formed their trade items. They gained access to rich iron deposits by waging war against their neighbours.
7. Handicraft was an important activity and included basketry and pottery.
8. The textile industry consisted of bark-cloth manufacture.
9. Salt mining was an important activity.
10. Fishing was carried out on Lake Victoria.
11. The Baganda also engaged in hunting to acquire ivory.

In conclusion, the Baganda were highly centralised. That is why when the British came to Uganda, they chose to collaborate with the Baganda in order to colonise Uganda.
1. Use library research and describe the theories related to the origin of the Ankole and Karagwe Kingdoms.
2. Identify the factors for the growth and expansion of the above kingdoms.
3. Describe the organisation of 19th-century Karagwe, Toro and Ankole Kingdoms.
4. Draw a map of East Africa and on it locate the selected centralised societies.

**Table 5.1: Features of centralised and non-centralised societies**

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<td>One leader at the top</td>
<td>Many leaders</td>
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**Activity of Integration**

In my district of birth, there were two private secondary schools. One was called Bright Academy S.S and the other was called GodMark S.S. They differed in the method of selecting student leaders. At Bright Academy S.S., they used the appointive method and had one head prefect who was a relative to the school director and was chosen by the head teacher. After being appointed, this head prefect moved from class to class choosing a friend to assist him in managing school affairs. At God Mark S.S., they used the elective method. They never had a head prefect but class monitors across all classes in the school who were voted into their positions by class members. These class monitors would report to the headmaster. At Bright Academy there were several student strikes resulting from poor student leadership.
Support materials

Figure 4.8: Forms of pre-colonial leadership

Instructions

1. What are the likely causes of strikes in Bright Academy S.S.?
2. If you are the head of a community dealing with the youth, what method would you use to choose leaders and why?
3. Looking at today’s forms of state leadership, which ones reflect pre-colonial East African leadership?

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you have been able to distinguish between a centralised and non-centralised society. Much as some were called centralised and others non-centralised they had a lot in common. Due to attachment and the respect the East Africans have for their cultures, traditional institutions have survived and remained strong up to today. The organisation of pre-colonial societies have given a shape to some of modern leadership of world states today. This belonging have become the source of pride to many East African societies today.