

BOOK REVIEW

Peter Wafula Wekesa. *History, Identity and the Bukusu-Bagisu Relations on the Kenya and Uganda Border*. London: Lexington Books, 2023. xxi + 213 pp. Index. Tables. Maps. Bibliography. Appendices. \$100. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1-66691-924-0.

This book examines the importance of border community relations in East Africa with reference to the Babukusu of western Kenya and the Bagisu of eastern Uganda. It contributes to the understanding of how the Bukusu and Bagisu communities have benefited from their relations despite being artificially divided by the British colonialists after the 1884 Berlin conference. It also provides clues on how borderlands, inhabited by the relatively identical communities, can serve as spaces for good neighborliness and regional integration.

The book is composed of six chapters covering the period between 1884 and 1997. Its introductory chapter indicates that the two communities' language and other cultural features were mainly identical during the precolonial period. This is elaborated in Chapter Two, which builds on the earlier literature by various scholars such as Were (1967), Makila (1978), and Simiyu (1991). Wekesa agrees with the previous scholars that male circumcision served as the most important cultural link between the two communities. He states that the “imbalu” and the “embalu” circumcision rituals of the Bagisu and the Babukusu respectively, were manifested through prayers to a common god who was believed to be on Mt. Masaaba (Elgon) (60). This chapter ends with the advent of British colonialism, which drew boundaries between the two communities and attempted to reduce their common identities.

Chapter Three contributes to our understanding of how the British colonialists affected the Babukusu-Bagisu transborder relations up to 1945. Wekesa reveals that the Babukusu were placed under Wanga sub-imperialism and the Bagisu were subjected to Buganda sub-imperialism. He insinuates that the boundary demarcation and the dynamics of colonial administration were aimed at erasing the fluidity of the precolonial period, so as to define the geographical scope of jurisdictions (80). He states that the Bagisu efforts to get rid of colonial agents had by the 1930s, kicked the Baganda chiefs out of the Bugisu administration while the Babukusu led by Pascal Nabwana had also succeeded in demanding for the retirement of the Wanga chiefs in the Kamilili and Malakisi locations (90). According to the author, “the objectives of [both communities] were hardly different and the members usually met to chart out common grievances for the entire region” (91).

The relevance of Chapter Four lies in its analysis of the Babukusu and Bagisu transborder cultural movements during the decolonization process from 1945 up to the early 1960s. Although the first half of the chapter is mainly composed of

far-fetched issues, it eventually focuses on relevant information about the two communities' relations, such as the emergence of sociocultural movement in such forms as Dini Ya Musambwa (DYM) in the 1940s. Apart from fostering solidarity among the two communities, the DYM raised their need for a religion that was rooted in the African traditions (108). The relevance of DYM to both communities was depicted by the popularity of this religious sect's founder (Elijah Masinde) and his emissaries in their strongholds. Although anti-colonial activities of DYM were branded as "tribal," it motivated one of the regional-based movements which contributed to decolonization of Kenya and Uganda in the 1950s.

As Wekesa states in Chapter Five, the leaders of the East African independent states acknowledged the negative effects of colonial partition on border communities such as the Bukusu and Bagisu but "were reluctant to support policies that were likely to refrain state sovereignty and consequently undermine their own power" (125). In spite of the leaders' reluctance, he observes that the relations between ordinary people in the two communities prevailed informally during the postcolonial period. He illustrates the scenario with the increased social and commercial interaction of ordinary Bagisu and Babukusu from 1967 to 1980 which led to growth of border centers such as Suam, Lwakhakha, Chepkube, and Malaba. While summarizing the chapter, he remarks that "a vibrant informal economy was evolving within the Bukusu-Bugisu borderland and challenging the statist restrictions on the economic, social and cultural levels" (151–52).

The sixth chapter is aimed at exploring the Babukusu-Bagisu borderland relations in the context of the renewed spirit of Pan-East Africanism. However, its target has been overshadowed by a lengthy discussion (154–62) of national security and economic issues without focusing on the relations between the two communities. The most relevant discussion on borderland relations, as Wekesa stresses (164), is about the activities of the February Eighteen Resistance Army (FERA), led by Odongo and Wafula who aimed at overthrowing Moi's government. He recounts that most of the FERA guerillas were recruited from among the Babukusu and Bagisu, and came under systematic government suppression. However, his statements such as "Rwandan leader Fred Gisa Rwigyema" (164) and "the creation of FERA by the Moi regime" (165) do not seem to match with the facts. In spite of such anomalies, the chapter sheds light on the relations between the two communities through informal means and particularly hints at the significance of *Insu Ya Masaaba* (House of Masaaba) which served as a cultural link between the Bagisu and Babukusu (171).

In summary, this is an interesting and systematically organized book. Certainly, many scholars and students with an interest on identity issues in borderlands will like it.

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