

## Pythons Worked

Constellating Communities of Practice with  
Conceptual Metaphor in Northern Lake Victoria,  
ca. A.D. 800 to 1200

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This chapter explores the emergence of a community of practice engaged with shrines dedicated to forging connections among dispersed communities of other practices such as ironwork, canoe-building, healing, fishing, and so forth along the shores of Lake Victoria in eastern Africa before A.D. 1000. Mediums and their interpreters, through techniques of imagination and travel that reached beyond the local, aligned a shrine community's engagement with other shrines that had different pasts. This process of constellating (Wenger 1998:126–130; Roddick and Stahl, this volume) involved conceptual experiments with meaning, a key element in how communities of practice are constellated. Working with objects, like the striking Luzira Group (Fig. 7.1; Posnansky 1995), practices such as spirit possession, and ideas like clanship, the conceptual experiments in question guided and responded to a larger scale of political life. Their lexical and material traces suggest that the dynamic involved a conflict. The historical standing of each locality, which local people conceptualized as a source of their success in assembling the particular array of skill and knowledge that made them attractive to the constellating group, was likely reconfigured as contenders over an expanded scale of social interaction crafted its history. The conceptual experiments with meaning analyzed and interpreted in this chapter elicited new ideologies of belonging in part by revising the historical terms on which such belonging turned.

This chapter expands on other explorations of the arguments people made in crafting expanded political scale in this part of east Africa (Cohen 1972; Feierman 1995; Kagwa 1971; Kodesh 2010; Schoenbrun 1998; Stephens 2013) by asking how people might have made such arguments stick (Barber 2007). How did the community dedicated to expanded scale overcome the authority, inertia, or disinterest that flowed



Figure 7.1. Luzira Head and one of two torsos. From Ashley and Reid 2008.

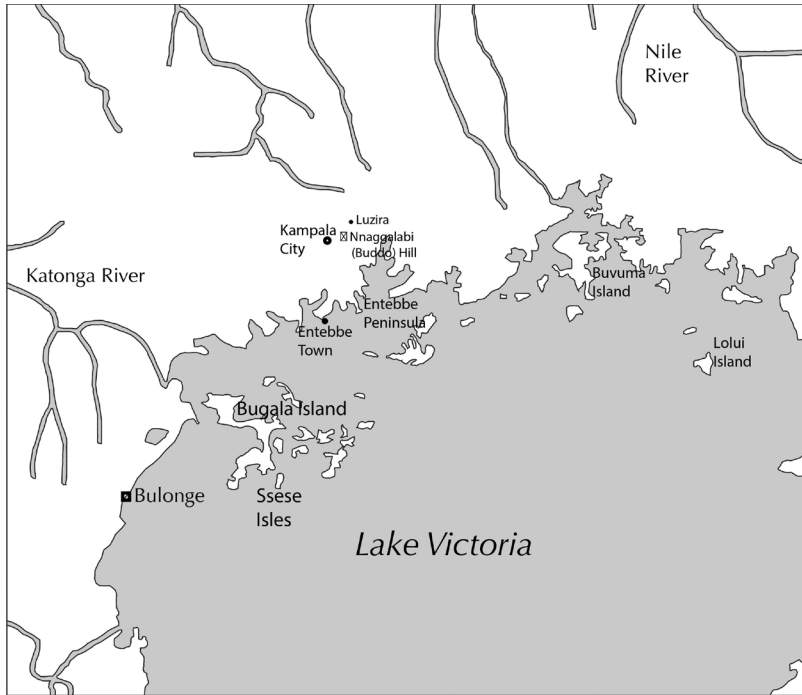
from respect for predecessors? It was the authority of ancestors that helped local people generate their wealth. Blending local history and practice underwrote access to the unseen and abstract powers people knew were necessary if not sufficient causes of such success. A thousand years ago, along the northern littoral of Lake Victoria, central Africa's most expansive body of water, women and men made pythons—as snakes resident at certain shrines, words, and an icon of a python wound round the neck of a thousand-year-old clay figure of a medium (Fig. 7.1)—an important part of the new form of clanship they created in answering these questions.

The historian Neil Kodesh set aside the idea that clans are kinship groups writ large to argue they are socially composed “networks of knowledge” (Kodesh 2008). One of the widely known oral traditions in Lake Victoria's northwest that Kodesh analyzed tells that founding figures of the Pangolin clan defeated Bemba the python by cutting off its head (Kagwa 1971:5–6; 1972[1912]:40–41; Kakoma et al. 1959:4–5; Roscoe 1911: 475–477). By listening to this story at shrines on the core estates of Buganda's clans, Kodesh came to understand it as a foundational account of “dislodging spiritual entities from their territorial bases” to extend “the territory for which a particular spirit and its earthly representatives might

ensure collective health and prosperity” (Kodesh 2010:30). The serpent Bemba was the “particular spirit” in question. By decapitating Bemba, and giving the snake’s head to Kintu, an efficacious, well-connected spirit medium (and a founder of Buganda, one of Africa’s oldest monarchies), the Pangolin clan expanded the territorial reach of its powers over health and wealth at Bemba’s expense.

The python was the figure to dislodge because it embodied the historical connection between the living and ancestors who had made the python’s territory wealthy. The bond between an ancestral spirit and python was rooted in places like shrines; it was the nexus in which the particular community hosting the snake met the challenges of collective well-being. To thrive in a place, one needed access to the forces that conditioned its prosperity and fecundity, and those forces resided as much in the past success and failure of people and spirits as in a present set of circumstance, ability, and spirit involvement. The latter factors produced abundant offspring, productive agricultures, and thriving communities of artisanal practice. Those who enjoyed that success understood it, in part, as the product of historical ties to ancestral figures, access to whom was provided by offerings and spirit mediumship. They understood success as flowing from a deep history of relations between ancestors and the living, in a particular place. Accounts make plain that that bond was activated in the course of mediumistic activity at shrines (Cohen 1972:44–45; Kagwa 1934[1918]:112–128; Kakoma et al. 1959:4ff; Kodesh 2010:73ff; Mackay 1890:172ff; Roscoe 1909; Speke 1863:394–396), some of which had a resident python.

African rock pythons love water and are common in Uganda, especially on Lake Victoria’s islands, “evidently swimming freely between them and the mainland” (Pitman 1935:54–57, 61, 64ff, 1936:213). They may become habituated to people (Pitman 1936:217). They slough their skin as they grow and have vestigial hind limbs, and adults hunt by stalking or laying in ambush before springing at their quarry. In this they behave like lion, leopard, and crocodile. But, unlike those predators—which were also held to be familiars for spirits a millennium ago—African rock pythons kill their prey by constriction. By distending their lower mandible, they swallow their victim whole and headfirst. Their bodies, life-course, and behavior separated pythons from other kinds of snakes and other kinds of predators.



**Figure 7.2.** Northern Lake Victoria. Adapted by Schoenbrun from a map made by Laurel Childress.

Fortunately, we possess a detailed account from early in the 20th century of a shrine with a resident python published by the Rev. John Roscoe, a colleague of Sir James Frazer and avid ethnographer of this region (Roscoe 1909, 1911:320–322). The shrine was a large conical house, 20' across and 25' tall, located in a forest by a river at Bulonge, on the mainland littoral (Fig. 7.2). Attended by a female guardian, the python lived in one side of the house, entering and exiting through a hole cut into the wall. The python drank milk mixed with kaolin from a large wooden bowl held by the guardian. The medium—a man, in Roscoe's account—occasionally canoed to an island in the Ssese group to get the cows that provided this milk. Members of a senior lineage from the Heart clan kept the house in good repair, providing a priest who received offerings of thanks from supplicants and “told the python what had been

brought [offerings] and the number of requests, [and] dressed the Medium in the sacred dress ready for the python to take possession of him” (Roscoe 1909:89). Roscoe’s and other descriptions of mediumistic events all mention beer (Buligwanga 2006[1916]:3; Mackay 1890:168, 173; Roscoe 1909:89; Speke 1863:395). The medium fed the python the offerings of fowls and goats to ensure success in fishing and reproduction. The medium made utterings while possessed. The Heart clan’s interpreter explained what the medium had foreseen, telling the people whose requests had been attended to what they must do to bring about the desired result. Such events occurred on each of seven days following the sighting of a new, waxing moon.

The mediums, priests, and other shrine personnel provided access to such spirits for ordinary people pursuing individual and collective well-being.<sup>1</sup> These intermediaries grounded well-being in territorial histories embodied in the snake and in the other, eco-geographical features where people understood such spirits resided. Wealth, health, and access to the spiritual authority of particular ancestors in a particular territory, therefore, all went together. But constellating involved multiple territories, ancestors, and histories, something people figured out how to manage by expanding the experience of spiritual embodiment. In addition to the longstanding practice in which a medium called a leader’s ancestral ghost from its residence in these places and life-forms, to possess her, some shrines began to include a practice in which people understood the medium and her patron spirit as in some manner coterminous. The polysemy of the word *mbàndwa*, which can refer to the spirit that possesses a medium and to the medium herself, captures that relation elegantly (Table 7.1).

The prior form of mediumship worked from the premise that places have resident plant, animal, or reptile spiritual authorities. In the newer practice, people emphasized the figure of the medium and her colleagues (hereafter, public healers; Feierman 1995:80) in interacting with spirits. That additional mode of engagement at a shrine enabled spiritual entities to travel with their mediums; potentially mobile spirits were available for inclusion in a social imaginary—and its histories—beyond the local. At Bulonge, for example, the python’s medium canoed to the Ssesse Islands, to fetch the cows whose milk the python drank. Opportunities for wealth and health could be pursued and expanded in the

**Table 7.1.** Lexical reconstructions, metaphors, and blends

Term	Gloss/semantics	Proto-language or language	Sources
<b>ngándá</b> (polysemous noun)	Heap, pile; clan	Proto-Bantu	Bastin et al. 2002:RN 1324
<b>kubándwa</b> (passive verb)	Be knocked down; be possessed by spirit	Proto-Great Lakes Bantu	Schoenbrun 1997:178
<b>kusambwà</b> (passive verb)	Be kicked	Circum-Lake	Schoenbrun 1997:226
<b>èkiká (s.); èbiká (pl.)</b> (polysemous nouns)	Big homestead; clan, family	Proto-North Nyanza	Stephens 2013:187
<b>ènzíramire</b> (compound noun)	Python; lit. avoidance, offering swallower. From Ganda: <i>kumira</i> (tr.), “swallow”; <i>kuzina</i> (tr.), “not to allow, reject, forbid.” Available for linguistic play in Ganda: <i>enzina</i> , “propitiatory sacrifice, offering”	Proto-West Nyanza	Snoxall 1967:204, 232, 265, 266, 355; Le Veux 1917:1037
<b>miryamirye</b> (reduplicated noun)	African rock python; <i>Python sebae</i> ; lit. swallows big things	Proto-Great Lakes Bantu	
<b>-sambwà</b> (polysemous noun, with different noun prefixes)	Territorial location of a spirit; the spirit; its familiar (including python); lit. kicked being	Circum-Lake Victoria	Schoenbrun 1997:226
<b>mbándwa</b> (polysemous noun)	Spirit; initiated medium; lit. person mounted by a spirit	Proto-West Nyanza	Schoenbrun 1997:178
<b>èmmandwà</b> (polysemous noun)	Spirit; initiated medium; python; bull	Ganda	Schoenbrun 1997:178
<b>ttimbà</b> (polysemous noun)	Python; lead drum in royal battery; a chief from Sese Isles is its hereditary keeper. From Ganda: <i>kutimba</i> , “bind, lash; hang (curtain or picture); decorate (room); drape, entwine”	Ganda	Snoxall 1967:312

presence of such mediums because they embodied the spiritual authority whose power and knowledge people needed access to in order to succeed. These public healers, working with speech and objects, improvised solutions to the challenges of expanded scales of social life, in the process crafting new histories for their new shapes.

A trace of this may be found in an object assemblage discovered in 1929 when a pressgang of Africans expanding the colonial-era Luzira prison found a set of figures made out of clay that included representations of a medium and two other persons (Ashley and Reid 2008; Reid and Ashley 2008). Associated pottery provided a proxy date of about a thousand years ago (Reid and Ashley 2008:104–108). One figure is a head with no body and two are torsos with no heads (Fig. 7.1). The torsos wear wrist bangles. The face's bulging eyes and parted lips evoke the experience of spirit possession. A thick, winding neck ring evokes a constricting python (Tantala 1989:613–615). The assemblage (discussed below) was deposited at a site within easy walking distance from Lake Victoria and only 10 kilometers from the hill where Bemba the Snake is said to have resided before being defeated by allies of Kintu (Nsimbi 1980[1954]:153–154). The assemblage represents a group of mediums and interpreters patronized by a territorial spirit, such as the python figure of Bemba. The Luzira Group is unlikely to have been unique during its time, but nothing like it is made today or has been found anywhere else in the region.

Understanding why people stopped making such objects requires broader historical context, including the emergence around A.D. 1000 of a constellating world of novel clanship in which local spiritual authorities were defeated, dislodged, or coopted. Oral histories of that process point to struggles over the standing of local territorial spiritual authority. In the current example, Lungfish clan histories exist in which a variant claims Bemba the Snake as a founding ancestor (Buligwanga 2006[1916]:10ff) and others do not (Kagwa 1972[1912]; Kakoma et al. 1959). Struggles over the standing of Bemba did not lead people to abandon the figure of the python. An important drum in Buganda's royal percussion battery is called *ttimbà* (python) and bears a bas-relief of an undulating python (Fig. 7.3). One Lungfish clan history that treats Bemba as a defeated tyrant keeps the python category alive in the figure and title of Ssematimba, made the clan's "judge" when an ancestor placed a



**Figure 7.3.** Timbà, a drum in the Ganda royal battery. Courtesy Albert and Katherine Cook Collection, Wellcome Library.

copper bracelet (*ekikomo*) on his wrist (Kagwa 1972[1912]:37). ‘Ssematimba’ means ‘Father of the Pythons.’ Whether Lungfish clan members claimed Bemba as a founding ancestor or forgot him, they used the figure of the python to revise local histories. Mediums used pythons



to align local communities of practice in a constellating process that yielded the knowledge networks that became the Lungfish clan.

Constellating thus involved conceptual experiments that unfolded at shrines, in which people marked things and ideas, making them available for revision (Keane 2010; Wenger 1998:91). Mobile mediums marked existing territorial spirits—like Bemba or Bulonge’s python—in order to debate their authority or efficacy. Mediums instigated the group’s reconfiguration, prompting members of a face-to-face community of practice to imagine their work connected to others not present—in part by questioning the efficacy of their existing spirits. The social dynamics at Bulonge suggest that mediums, interpreters, and other shrine personnel brokered participation by guiding imagination beyond local practice and aligning it with other places (cf. Gosselain, this volume). They could bring life to a reified thing or word, clarify its mute ambiguity in the presence of supplicants, restate its lost purpose, propose entirely new purposes, or respond to others’ efforts to do the same (Wenger 1998:108–110, 128–131, 179–187).

This chapter explores these conceptual and participatory contingencies of constellating by analyzing and interpreting a complex of conceptual metaphor and blends (discussed below), with lexical and material iterations that juxtapose eating, totemic avoidances, and pythons in contexts of spirit possession. That complex facilitated connecting communities of practice beyond their local littoral settings on Lake Victoria and framed struggles over doing so. Beyond the face-to-face lay opportunity for prosperity and fecundity at the close of the first millennium A.D. But the moral weight of the forms of power available to steer things in that direction grew from local histories and discourses of affiliation. This arrangement afforded constellating with different shapes that emerge from the contingent contexts of their growth.

## **Orientations**

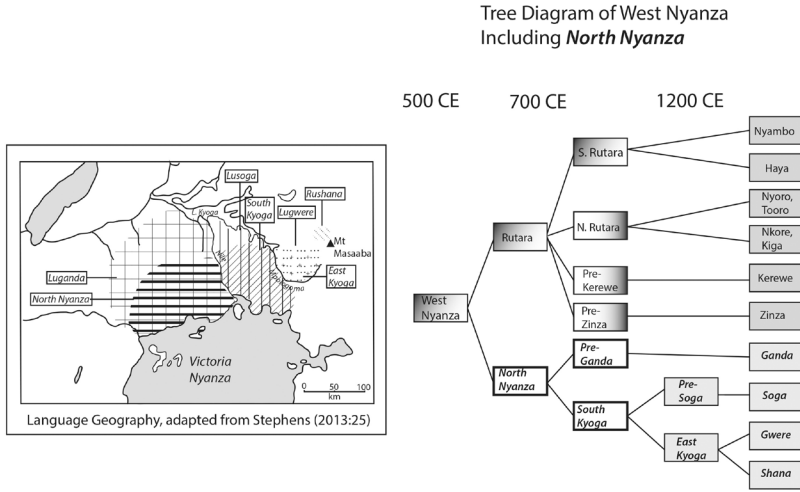
The second-largest freshwater lake on earth has a crenellated geography favoring the canoe for connecting far-flung littoral communities (Fig. 7.2). People had been developing Lake Victoria’s challenging, multifaceted riches for centuries (Ashley 2005) by the time someone formed the Luzira Group. More than 100 islands lie offshore, some mere rocky tumbles, most rolling rises of rich soils and forests (Reid and Ashley



**Figure 7.4.** Sewn canoe (èryâto) on Lake Victoria. From Kirkland 1908:29.

2014). Thunderstorms bring disorienting curtains of rain and huge waves that could pulverize a canoe (Mackay 1884:275–276). Winds and strong currents can drive a determined crew off course and create rapidly shifting conditions for fishing. Very large, sewn canoes were closely associated in the 19th century with professional canoe men from the Ssesse and Buvuma Islands (Fig. 7.4; Kirkland 1908). These may have been in use since much earlier in the first millennium. Ganda speakers shifted their term (*èryâto*), which in the majority of other Bantu languages refers to a dugout, to refer to the large sewn canoe. They called the dugout by a new term, *èmmânvu* (Snoxall 1967:195, 205). The semantic shift implied that the sewn canoe had been considered the standard—and the dugout worthy of a new name—since as early as the 12th century, when the Ganda speech community emerged from the dissolution of its ancestral speech community, North Nyanza.

The emergence along Lake Victoria's northwest littoral of a new speech community—North Nyanza Bantu—is well supported by exclusive lexical and phonological features established according to comparative historical linguistic method (Stephens 2007:256–294). During



**Figure 7.5.** Linguistic geography of northern Lake Victoria. Redrawn from Stephens 2013:25.

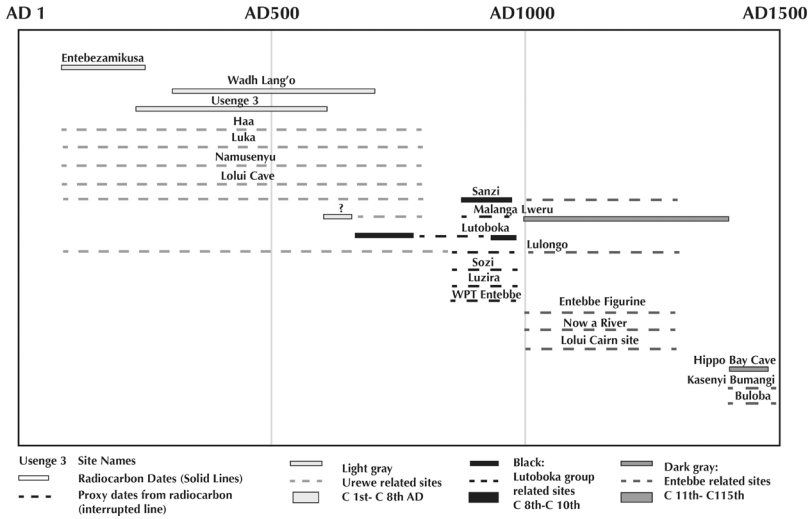
the 1100s, it split into two branches, separated by the River Nile (Stephens 2013:24; Fig. 7.5). The North Nyanza lexicon included a rich and growing vocabulary related to bananas, reflecting the ongoing development of cultivars and marking banana gardens as land worth inheriting (Schoenbrun 1998:79–83; Stephens 2013:66–71). Archaeological evidence is rich for grain-processing and field systems of grain (Reid and Ashley 2014:183–185). A period of broadly tighter water budgets opened all across east Africa between the seventh and the ninth centuries and lasted until the 13th century (Ssemmanda et al. 2005; Verschuren 2004). At smaller spatiotemporal scales the shrinking regional water budgets had unique shapes. Shifting volumes of rainfall were concretely expressed as two big drops in Lake Victoria’s level, one between 1140 and 1160 and a larger one between A.D. 1180 and 1200 (Stager and Johnson 2000; Stager et al. 2003:179, 180, items “g” and “h” in Fig. 7). In just two generations Lake Victoria’s littoral and climate changed. North Nyanza speakers used exclusive new words for the novel seasonality, capturing an emerging uncertainty over the timing and volume of short rains.<sup>2</sup>

Historical linguistic evidence suggests that dislodging territorial spirits and constellating communities of practice through mobile medi-

umship and a new form of clanship began after about A.D. 800. Before then, leaders from lineages with a longstanding local presence managed the structured improvisations that instigated encounters with embodied spirits at python shrines like the one at Bulonge. A term exists today in many of the region's languages for a territorial spirit managed by members of firstcomer lineages like those at Bulonge. But its distribution is limited to Lake Victoria's littoral, or just behind, suggesting that the region's Bantu-speaking societies used this practice (Table 7.1; Schoenbrun 1998:197–203). From the 8th–12th centuries, when Proto-North Nyanza existed as a speech community on Lake Victoria's northwestern littoral (Stephens 2013:23–24; Fig. 7.5), terms for spirit mediumship grew polysemic, as public healers began to travel between communities instigating such encounters (Cohen 1972:70–83; Kiwanuka 1972:31–35; Kodesh 2010:27–88; Schoenbrun 1998:203–206). Learning to live in a world beyond the face-to-face was part of making Lake Victoria home.

That involved constellating dispersed settlements into the novel scales of interaction and shifting networks of political affiliation that Kodesh calls “clans” and North Nyanza speakers called *ebika* (pl.). Many of Africa's some 600 Bantu languages—including many in our region—have a word, \**nganda*, that can be glossed in English as “clan” (Bastin et al. 2002:RN 1324). The distribution's breadth implies some antiquity for the idea and practice of composing “networks of knowledge” (Kodesh 2008:197) as keys to prosperity and a technique of political affiliation. Membership was marked by shared totemic avoidances (Roscoe 1911:133) as well as claims to a distant, shared ancestral figure or figures (Cohen 1972:6–7; Kagwa 1972[1912]:1). So, at the same time that they expanded the lexicon of mediumship to elide the difference between a medium and a spirit and promote spiritual portability, North Nyanza speakers replaced an old term, *nganda* (pl.), with a new one, *ebika* (pl.), as the name for “clans,” retaining the use of shared avoidances and ancestral figures (Table 7.1).

At the same time, potters made different wares (Ashley 2005; Posnansky 1961; Reid 2003). Some worked in an older ceramic register with roots in the last millennium B.C., which I call Classical Urewe ware, in order to set it off from Transitional Urewes, the variations on Classical Urewes developed by potters across Lake Victoria's northern littoral. Transitional Urewes first appeared in the 7th century, were widely



**Figure 7.6.** Chronology of northern Lake Victoria ceramic traditions. Redrawn from Ashley 2010:149.

dispersed by the 9th century, and gradually disappeared in the 13th century (Ashley 2005:285–288, 304; Fig. 7.6); they were a “group of ceramics found exclusively on and around Victoria Nyanza and currently focused in Uganda” (Ashley 2010:149). Transitional Urewe potters shifted from Classical Urewe’s careful decoration, finely sorted fabrics, and varied vessel forms to a narrower set of forms with less finely executed decoration (Ashley 2010:149–153; Reid 2003). In the 1000s, some potters began to make Entebbe ware, unique in decoration and vessel type, its large bowls implying new dimensions to feasting. All known Entebbe ware sites, from Lolui Island to west of Entebbe, lie less than seven kilometers from the shore (Ashley 2010:154–156).

The formally diverse Transitionals Urewes (Ashley 2010:146), widespread around Lake Victoria’s northern littoral by the 800s, pointed to the historical depth of Classical Urewe wares. The differences between them marked the earlier Urewe vessel forms and decoration as classical. After A.D. 1000, people embraced Entebbe ware’s new decorative grammar and very large bowls for serving beer. These pots broke with the historical depth of Urewe wares, affording a new orientation toward

larger gatherings during which feasting with the new bowls pointed to aspirational futures, rather than an aura of antiquity. Thus, at sites with both Classical and Transitional Urewes, but no Entebbe wares, farmers and fishers were making Lake Victoria's northern littoral home in part through the process we have reviewed. They transformed particular ancestral ghosts into territorial spirits. That process involved establishing and promoting an historical depth to a leading lineage's ties to a place, reflected in the curatorial concerns with ancient decorative syntaxes and vessel shape grammars present on Transitional Urewe pots and showing clear links with Classical Urewes.

Multicomponent sites such as Luzira, where Entebbe pottery appears with Classical and Transitional Urewes, reflect a shift in orientation. Entebbe ware's bowls were huge: full of beer, they would have been extremely difficult to move (Ashley 2010:155). Their size clearly implied a larger scale for public events, like those commonly associated with offerings and feasting at New Moon ceremonies held at shrines like Bulonge. The larger group of people involved in such feasting surely included visitors as well as locals. So, the feasts at some of these multicomponent sites were likely some of the first involving mobile mediumship and constellating communities of practice.

Sites with Entebbe pottery but no Urewe began to appear in the 1200s (Fig. 7.6). They were used by the descendants of the generations that experienced the newly uncertain "short rains," the people who had invested in intensive cereal and banana agricultures and had possibly begun using the large, sewn canoes. Such sites were new communities, established as part of the process of constellating, which brings us back to the Luzira Group.

Ceri Ashley and Andrew Reid, their most recent archaeologists, argue that the head and the major fragments "were partial and broken prior to deposition," although "several of the large pieces" were clearly damaged in discovery (Reid and Ashley 2008:104). All of the material was found together in the three shaft-pits (Ashley and Reid 2008:115). Information about which parts of the assemblage were found in which pits has been lost, but the pits are not associated with any structure or debris indexing mundane, domestic activity. The uniformity of color and mica intrusions in the clay fabric of pots and figures suggest to Ashley and Reid (2008:109–114) that "the same productive community" made

them. Wherever else the Luzira Group (as a whole or in parts) may have been made and used, it went into the ground together.

The Luzira Group was discovered with functional pottery sherds, of which 65 so-called “feature sherds” remain (Ashley and Reid 2008:110).<sup>3</sup> Of these, 44 belong to two variants of Transitional Urewe (Ashley 2005: 178–182, 212–213). Six Classical Urewe sherds index the full range of its functional vessel forms, carefully incised decoration, and beveled rims (Ashley and Reid 2008:112). One Entebbe sherd was part of the assemblage. This suggests that the Luzira Group was broadly contemporary with the time of Transitional Urewe, no younger than its advent, in the eighth and ninth centuries A.D. (Ashley 2005:177). The Classical Urewe, if not deposited at the end of very long lives, make it possible that the Luzira Group is perhaps as old as the sixth and seventh centuries when Classical Urewes first showed up in this part of their currently known distribution (Reid and Ashley 2014:182; Fig. 7.7). But, if the single Entebbe sherd is not merely an intrusion from the surface,<sup>4</sup> it means the site existed at least to the 12th century.

Whether or not the Luzira Group’s life began earlier—or pointed to the past—it was put into the ground at some moment during the later centuries of settling Lake Victoria’s littoral. Current dating of the advent of Entebbe ware makes the 12th century the earliest time for their deposition. The Luzira Group could have been made well before then, when people were converting ancestral ghosts to territorial spirits in this location, and then buried during the 12th century, when people were converting territorial spirits into portable ones, through the person of the medium, and constellating dispersed communities into clans. They turned from the deep past to new horizons, taking shape as clan histories but prompted by the work of mediumship.

The itinerant mediums who organized that process formed their political aspirations in contexts of a novel seasonality, increasing linguistic difference and ceramic variability, and continued development of an intensive grain and banana agriculture, all of which ground this chapter’s central historical argument: lexical and material reifications prompted new kinds of engagement, novel forms of imagination, and improvisational alignments oriented to constellating (Roddick and Stahl, this volume). By marking these reifications, public healers facilitated the sort of debates needed to dislodge, coopt, or suppress the local within new

terms and practices, making the new groups, or clanship, habitual. The curatorial life of the Luzira Group, reflected in its deposition, suggests that such prompts had a life-span, the end of which was implicated in the beginning of successful constellating.

### **Literal Meaning, Marking, and Conceptual Metaphor: Tools of Imagination and Alignment**

Meaning lies at the center of the literature on communities of practice, but it is rarely discussed with much nuance (Lave 1993:8; Wenger 1998: 4–5). Making meaning is shaped by so many variables—social position, gender, age, power, context, and so forth—that such a foundational topic is elusive. Therefore, the anthropologist Webb Keane suggests, scholars must approach meaning as historically specific “basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world” and “what kinds of agentive subjects and acted-upon objects might be found in the world” (Keane 2003:409, 419ff). These assumptions apply to material things as well as language, rendering interpretation a dynamic process by which people lend coherence to, or reshuffle, the subjects and objects that shape the social life of language and materiality. The meaning of language and things therefore grows in contexts of use—like shrines and beer drinks—that mutually implicate cognitive, material, and social processes (Lave and Wenger 1991:36). By framing meaning as action, we can think about what something can mean and put the shapes of semantic fields in motion.

These assumptions ground marking, the process by which a material or lexical form stands out from a background of habitual, repeated processes. The centrality of marking “certain parts of experience for special attention” in terms of “its relationship to human subjectivity, agency, and values” restrains imposing on people in the past “some particular set of utilitarian judgments or practical reasons that would be obvious to us” (Keane 2010:213). The Luzira Group’s figures were marked because they stood out from other objects made from clay, like pots. Otherwise ordinary pots may be marked by placing them in an unusual location such as the repaired Classical Urewe pot placed in an uninhabitable rock shelter on Lolui Island or the complete vessels placed in smelting furnaces or shaft pits (Ashley 2010:145–146). A marked lexical form works in the same manner, often by adding a morphological



**Table 7.2.** Aspects of conceptual metaphor (adapted from Ortman 2000)

Property	English example
Directionality	TIME IS MONEY, but money is not time.
Superordination	Expressions of LIFE IS A JOURNEY involve modes of transportation: “Her career is on track.”
Invariance	LIFE IS A JOURNEY, but you can’t go back and take the other fork in the road.
Constitutive	POLITICS IS WAR: “give ground,” “attack,” “defend,” etc.
Blending	BRAINSTORMING is valuable, but a storming brain is fanciful.
Experiential	ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER. Body temperature rises when you get “steaming mad.”

feature contrasting gender or agency. Many Bantu languages—but not Ganda!—add a passive suffix to verbs describing “to marry” to signify the bride’s involvement. When speaking about grooms marrying, no such particle marks their action: grooms marry while brides are married. Markedness does not make meaning, but it renders words and things available for others to evaluate, alter, and discuss (Keane 2010:188ff).

Conceptual metaphor opens up this dynamic because it binds people to new ideas in part through drawing on a fund of common embodied experience. Like any other metaphor, a conceptual metaphor produces knowledge through juxtaposition: one thing is grasped in terms of another (Gibbs 2011:18; Lakoff and Johnson 1988[1980]:246–249; Ortman 2000; Table 7.2). Asking you to understand meaning by thinking about prehensilism draws on your experience of bounded things like containers in order to confine the indeterminacies of meaning in a package that a hand can grab. These sources of conceptual metaphor are “motivated by different experiential invariants,” or embodied experiences of the world, whose structured mappings lend coherence to their targets (Fusaroli and Morgagni 2011:5). According to one scholar, such mappings are “basins of attraction within a self-organized system involving the interplay of brains, bodies, and the world” (Gibbs 2011:30). They are

emergent “way[s] to increase the stability of conceptual representation” (Hutchins 2005:1558).

Juxtaposition-as-understanding combines cognizing individuals, whose embodied experiences of the world provide the sources for conceptual metaphor, with the social distribution of understandable cultural values, the assumptions or literal meanings marking the targets (Fusaroli and Morgagni 2011). The persistent, shifting need for reference in the world, and the excess of interpretation, render the ordering properties of conceptual metaphors central to learning in and constellating communities of practice. When people use the target of a conceptual metaphor as a source in another metaphorical juxtaposition, they blend different conceptual metaphors, producing complex techniques of meaning in play with marking. The resulting conceptual blends involve cross-domain mappings of conceptual metaphors (Grady et al. 1999; Ortman 2000:618).

Conceptual metaphors and metaphorical blends have linguistic iterations in compound words, in a word’s polysemy, and in seriated semantic shifts, all of which may be placed in a sequence of speech community events such as divergence and transfer (Ortman 2013:89–96; Schoenbrun 2012:297–300). Iterations in decoration, form, and spatial organization and in use and depositional practice may be placed in an absolute chronology of material culture. Systematic correspondences between aspects of these iterations, when located in the same temporal and spatial frame, confirm their grounding in the particular shared domains of embodied experience affording them. Their elaborations reveal the ways in which the conceptualization enabled by marking afforded particular shapes to struggles over the changing scale of social life, by which people converted novelty to habit.

Literal meaning is the habitual ground on which people grasp and deploy meaning and against which marking makes some things stand out. Conceptual metaphor and metaphorical blends provide important clues about contexts of use for marking and meaning-making in historical settings, like the current one, that call on ethnographic analogy to bring life to them. Literal meaning, marking, and metaphor provide analytical leverage on Wenger’s central questions of imagination and alignment. They reveal how people addressed the challenges of dislodging, coopting, or suppressing local historical knowledge in creating clanship as a practice of constellating. By looking more directly at these

tools, we can get at the dynamics of struggle over local historical standing entailed by constellating.

### **Python Work: Conceptual Metaphors and Blends on Lake Victoria's Northwestern Littoral**

A widespread conceptual metaphor, EATING IS POWER (Table 7.1), has a lexical form reconstructed to the mid-first millennium language group from which North Nyanza, among others, emerged. The polysemous verb *kulya* (to eat; rule; provide prosperity) allowed speakers to juxtapose the destruction, pleasure, waste, growth, and transformation in the experience of eating with practices of giving, redistributing, and transforming wealth into more wealth, a core element of the commensal politics of feasting (Dietler 2001). Shifts in eating and drinking during the 12th century, reflected in Entebbe ware's large bowls, point to larger publics, but they do not reveal a particular strategy for forming them, such as labor mobilization (Dietler and Herbich 2001). However, it is easy to imagine participants drawing on new experiences of eating and drinking to elaborate ideas about other social processes, such as the instrumental power to put on such feasts and the opportunities for semantic creativity that they occasioned (Parkin 1982:xlvi). The mundane experience of eating, when juxtaposed to rule and prosperity, structured processes and states of power, prompting or facilitating elaborations, such as the idea that leaders are master hunter-eaters like leopards, lions, crocodiles, or pythons.

In the same regional language group, those predators were familiars for territorial spirits, called *m̄sambwà* (Table 7.1). This polysemy marked the metaphorical proposition that SPIRITS ARE PREDATORS signified in particular names for the African rock python that elaborate its prodigious capacities for swallowing very large prey whole. The noun *m̄sambwà* (s.) was derived from the verb *k̄sambwa* (to be kicked), grounding spirit, its familiar, and place in the experience of possession as the experience of being physically attacked. Those experiences—possession as the physical attack by a particular familiar—marked pythons as spirits against the habitual experience of a python as a predator.

Prompted by mediums who behaved in this manner—the medium at Bulonge “went down on his face and wiggled about upon his stomach

like a snake” (Roscoe 1909:89)—people elaborated that distinction in another metaphor, MEDIUMS ARE PYTHONS. This idea took the lexical form *èmmandwà* (Table 7.1), a widely distributed polysemous term signifying both “a medium” and “a spirit.” It is only in Ganda, one of the two languages formed as the North Nyanza subgroup dissolved in the 12th century, that *èmmandwà* may signify “python” and “bull” as well as “spirit” and “medium” (Schoenbrun 2006:1420–4).<sup>5</sup> Ganda speakers could think and talk about any or all of these objects using the same word.

At some point, and for an unknown length of time between A.D. 700 and 1100, when North Nyanza was still an interacting speech community, people on the Entebbe peninsula could also think and act with the conceptual blends of the Luzira Group, in which the python figured prominently. The coiled neck ring on the Luzira Head evokes a python in the act of constricting prey before eating, marking that aspect of the snake’s behavior as belonging in some way to mediumship. In order to appreciate the power of this conceptual blend over thinking and action—and to open up questions of the power to propose it—pythons (the snakes, not the mediums or spirits) beckon.

Compared with other animal life populating an ordinary village a thousand years ago—sheep, goats, cattle, guinea fowl, chickens—pythons were probably encountered rarely but regularly. Their love of water brought them into contact with people at springs, lakes, swamps, and watercourses. The presence of a python at a shrine surely stood out from the banal, domesticated village creatures, all of which could be offered to shrines (Kagwa 1934[1918]:114; Roscoe 1909:89). Visitors could wonder about the differences between large snakes they didn’t eat but which ate distinctively and the domestic animals people ate or milked. Or they could reflect on differences between pythons and other large predators not eaten by people but which ate distinctively compared to pythons. Pythons were marked from other animals linked with territorial spirits because they blended and departed from the eating techniques of predators like lion and leopard.

Ordinary people’s experience of pythons afforded grounds for public healers to stage circumstances instigating thinking and acting with pythons, as at Bulonge. There, one index of a python’s power was swallowing the offerings brought by supplicants. Another index was spirit possession, an experience described as being “knocked down,” “seized

or mounted by the head,” or “kicked” (Roscoe 1909:90; Table 7.1). The dramatic effect of possession naturalized a medium’s practice, lending it social power and a literal meaning in which spirits could possess mediums. Marking mediums as indexical brought them into the flow of history, in part by exposing them to the semiotic potential of that literal meaning. Living pythons at shrines like Bulonge were material anchors for these complex emergent practices. The terracotta figures from Luzira may have been too.

For their makers, these objects materialized ideas, even if for those who encountered them the objects brought other ideas to mind, or none at all. A fair amount might be said about what those ideas were by “reading” the assemblage, using the syntax of production, use, and deposition. But we only have evidence about deposition, an outstanding feature of which is their having been broken before being installed in pits. By breaking and moving them below the surface of the earth—the place where people claimed many spirits resided (Kagwa 1934[1918]:112–113; Tantala 1989)—did people decommission or recommission them? We may never know because the missing pieces defy analysis as acts of interpretation in the absence of intact, analogous figures. We do not even know which buried pieces were deposited in each of the three pits. But, the fragments point to other absences, like the flesh-and-blood people of which the terracotta figures were icons or whom they indexed in some manner, if ceramicists and mediums could be the same person back then. Those persons and their histories—or simply the set of categories a group of mediums embodied—hovered near the terracottas, potential subjects of others’ imaginations and actions.

It is intriguing that the Luzira Head is built on a coiled pot and has been torn from a base of some sort, while the smaller torsos have been torn from what were presumably heads and hands. Perhaps the burial of the head rendered a living medium unavailable to possession by a patron spirit, perhaps one that manifested as a python. Did the burial of the iconic bodies render local living healers—whose identity as figures (interpreters?) in a public healing group is hinted at by the bangles they wear<sup>6</sup>—unavailable to manage and translate the medium’s messages while possessed? If so, breaking these figures prior to deposition was analogous to the story of Bemba’s decapitation by founding figures in the Pangolin clan, described above.

Kodesh's rich reinterpretation of that story reveals the significance of the dramatic conclusion in which Nfudu and Kigave (founding figures of the Pangolin clan) decapitate Bemba the Snake and bring his head to Kintu, their patron medium and spirit. For Kodesh, the vignette represents the defeat of one public healing network by the superior power of another one. At least one Lungfish clan history (Buligwanga 2006[1916]) claims Bemba as a figure involved in founding their clan. The versions of the encounter told since the 19th century agree Bemba's locus of authority lay on Nnaggalabi Hill, now called Buddo Hill, a 10-kilometer walk from Luzira. Without putting too fine a point on things, the evidence suggests that constellating communities of practice involved contested improvisations in material, language, and narrative, in which public healers used the python to figure imagination as well as to realign communities of practice. The figure of the python prompted struggles over local histories in the context of crafting new histories of clanship through a community of practice of public healing increasingly dedicated to the work of constellating other communities of practice.

The proxy dates assigned to the Luzira Group between the 9th and the 11th centuries broadly match the formation and initial divergence of the North Nyanza speech community into two branches. Only one (Pre-Ganda, centered in Lake Victoria's northwestern littoral) had in its vocabulary all of the following items: (Table 7.1) the compound term *enziramire* (python; offering or avoidance swallower) and the polysemous terms *òmúsâmbwa*, *èmmawà*, and *ttiimbà*, which elaborated the conceptual metaphor EATING IS POWER, and the conceptual blends, SPIRITS ARE PYTHONS, MEDIUMS ARE PYTHONS, and PYTHONS ARE DRUMS, respectively. The congruence in time and space of lexical and material iterations of these blends suggests the Luzira Group represented public healers patronized by the territorial spirit of a python. The Luzira Group's depositional associations with Classical Urewes, Transitional Urewes, and the single rim sherd of the distinct Entebbe ware—only the last two of which have a strictly maritime distribution—implicate the figures in participatory processes of local authority in the context of that emerging maritime world.

Metaphors and blends juxtaposing eating, mediumship, groupness, and aspiration facilitated people at one shrine imagining that they shared things with people using other shrines, whom they would never meet,

and aligned engagement with their shrine toward other shrines. This worked, in part, by people using the schematic structure of metaphors and blends to compress information about the past and the present—or to lessen the cognitive burden such a body of information imposed—by materializing a particular and familiar structure for that information (Hutchins 2005). For example, by mixing experiences of mediums being possessed by a python with the politics of group belonging enacted at shrines like Bulonge, these metaphors and blends condensed meaning in particular ways. The python's compound name, *ènziramire* or *uruziramire* (Table 7.1) referred to the creature's capacity to swallow the offerings supplicants brought in order to secure the outcomes they sought and to swallow the things that members of a group avoided, allowing new groups—like clans—to form. That idea was nothing new, if the antiquity of these terms is accurate. The group of public healers who facilitated productive and reproductive success for a local community, materialized by the Luzira figures, was familiar and thus easily translatable across time and space because people already relied on such groups of flesh and blood mediums for consequential encounters with the spirits that mattered in their territories.

But, after A.D. 1000, the role for individual mediums and their public healing groups changed. They became “brokers” who “introduce elements of one practice into another” (Wenger 1998:105) in part by constellating dispersed localities with valuable accumulations of skill and knowledge through a public healing community of practice that transported their spiritual authority beyond particular territorial bases (Kodesh 2010). Lexical and material conceptual blends of eating, mediumship, and pythons marked fields of imagination that mediums could shape to align particular localities with other communities of practice. By enlisting the resources of the emerging network that were not local, mediums could respond to local needs. By swallowing supplicants' offerings and the avoidances that marked their belonging to one group, python work opened the way for people and their locales to take up new roles in a larger collectivity.

The figure of the python at one shrine enabled people there to think about pythons at other shrines in an emergent network. Pythons resident at shrines enabled that to which they were linked indexically, such as ancestors or other spiritual personae, to come into conversation. The

mix of presence and absence accomplished by calling pythons “avoidance/offering swallower” (*ènziramire*), housing and feeding them at shrines, and marking them by rendering an iconic presence on objects like the Luzira Head, which are then bundled with other clay figures and embossed and functional pot sherds, all constitute the python as a symbol. They were the raw material the symbol compressed or reified, and they were the practices that altered what the symbol could entail. Markedness and absence together made the python something special, lent it an otherness it did not already possess (effective, in part, because people encountered other snakes and animals). Encountering pythons at territorial spirit (*mùsambwà*) shrines cast that figuring into a new relief, making it susceptible to further “experience, reflection and reappropriation” (Keane 2010:196–198) that apparently led people to stop making such figures.

Shrine managers at places like Bulonge supervised offerings, facilitated possession by a spirit, interpreted the significance of what a medium said while possessed, and so forth. They marked new ideas and things by recruiting them to amplify existing domains or as tokens of a new type of domain that had appeared or was appearing in ordinary life. They enjoyed an advantage in semantic creativity, as a consequence of these responsibilities, but held no monopoly on such creative marking. Given the interplay of supplicant, medium, and interpreter with local conditions, critique arose. Pythons were old symbols pressed into new service as people with deep local histories on Lake Victoria’s littoral interacted.

## Conclusion

Clan histories used idioms of travel and descent to align the imagination of localities with people who had particular skills and knowledge toward mutual engagement. Mobile, founding figures of a clan’s first generations are also marked as mediums facilitating encounters with spirits (Kagwa 1972[1912]; Kodesh 2010:27–66; Schoenbrun 1998:97–112, 195–206). In clan histories these idioms stake different claims on past figures. For example, at least one branch of the Lungfish clan claims Bemba the snake as a founding ancestor, despite the centrality of the story of Bemba’s defeat and decapitation by Kintu and his allies in the Pangolin clan in accounts of establishing the Buganda kingdom.<sup>7</sup> The variant



reflects contests over the outcomes of struggles over constellating communities of practice, revealing the challenges of sustaining mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoires as the intimacies of face-to-face proximity interacted with the expansive world of clanship articulated through public healing and mobile, then itinerant mediumship. Metaphors and blends juxtaposing a python's capacity for swallowing prey whole to the "swallowing" of propitiatory offerings and of the avoidances that marked membership in a local group, mixed eating, mediumship, belonging, and aspiration. They framed the terms of debate over the authority of portable spirits in a recursively creative manner, allowing both spirit and authority to travel across time and space. But the metaphors and blends also oriented python work toward the powerful medium-leaders who guided the process at the instigation of supplicants at repetitive calendrical events, such as the appearance of the New Moon (Keane 2003:410; Lave 1993:23; Wenger 1998:84). Instigation issued from a variety of sources, but shrine managers' positions afforded opportunities for semantic creativity, steering its entailments in particular directions (Kodesh 2010:40).

By making portable the authority of territorial spirits, some brokers shifted mediumship away from the exclusive control of firstcomer lineages ensconced in a particular territory, an imaginative act on display in the discursive idioms of clan histories. Historians have argued that this shift occurred in the 14th and 15th centuries as intensive agriculture sharpened struggles over access to and inheritance of lands best suited to bananas or grains (Kodesh 2010:89; Schoenbrun 1998:200–206). The story told here suggests the process was multifaceted, tied as much to opportunities for efficient travel on Lake Victoria as to the political economy of intensive cereal and banana farming, with stops and starts unfolding over as many as five centuries earlier. Early efforts struggled to reconfigure the marks of legitimate access to such mediumship away from their habitual sources: shared residence and face-to-face interaction that produced the moral heft and historical weight that residents invested in such locales. In the course of constellation, whose histories and places would count and on what terms? Python work held out the promise of forgetting local belonging, in the form of swallowed offerings, avoidances, and the reconfigured groupness to which one, or one's descendants, might belong. Constellating communities of practice was

a central strategy for increasing prosperity, security, and cultural mixing in the 12th century as a new seasonality set in, agroeconomic commitments deepened, and linguistic diversity grew.

Conceptual metaphor and blending open the dynamics of power and scale in communities of practice to analysis and interpretation because they may be tracked in both lexical and material form. Their elaboration in blends and occasional fossilization (Ortman 2013:84–85) are the contingent locations for marked and habitual processes, indexing engagement, imagination, and alignment between communities of practice, which remain opaque for historians working in times beyond literacy or a dense archaeological record. Conflating mediums and pythons—in words, possession, and clay—presumed a rich, historical experience with each that informed recognizing them as one. But their joining in the juxtaposition *MEDIUMS ARE PYTHONS* marked them for debate and revision of a new sort than those marked by *SPIRITS ARE PYTHONS*. The latter rested on experience in a particular location and its surroundings where pythons and mediums resided. *MEDIUMS ARE PYTHONS* emphasized the experience of interactions between a medium—who could travel—and a python, fostering new practices of power in which python-mediums swallowed the bonds of shared avoidances so that new groups could form.

Constellating interaction between localities, mediums, and locals had to deal with the historical knowledge that gave lineage elders authority to guide encounters between resident supplicants and the spirits that patronized their locality. In producing new links between such communities constituting the emergence of a clan, each constellating locality had to create a new reification: their version of a clan history accommodating or reconfiguring local power (Kodesh 2010:39–48). Therefore, python work was also boundary work, involved in the interplay of imagination and alignment that engagement with shrines prompted. Pythons were boundary objects linking pasts, presents, and futures and providing material anchors for new historical knowledge attendant on constellation (see also Harris, Sassaman, this volume). Some iterations lasted—the notion that pythons swallowed offerings and avoidances—and others, like the practice of making terracotta figures tied to mediumship, fell away. The disappearance of the Luzira Group indexed the defeat of a particular “local history,” but not its disappearance from historical

accounts. The one retained in Buligwanga's narrative reveals that people could make pythons persist as symbols of reconfigured groupness. Early Ganda speakers elaborated lexical and material iterations of conceptual metaphor and blends in a fashion contingent upon struggles over local historical standing perceivable in the variants of clan histories that took shape in the aftermaths of struggle.

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## Notes

1. One clan supplied priests for a particular shrine. Mediums might come from any group. Youths who cared for a large shrine had often been sent there by parents grateful for their good fortune in having children. Such supplicants made up the largest single group at a shrine (Kaggwa 1934[1918]; Kodesh 2010; Roscoe 1911; Tantala 1989).

2. Radiocarbon dates for the climatic shifts match glottochronological dates for the dissolution of Proto-North Nyanza and the subsequent formation of Pre-Luganda and Proto-South Kyoga (Stephens 2013:23–24). The new terms for short rains thus provide independent evidence for the dated paleoclimatic shifts, confirming the later 1100s as the closing decades of Proto-North Nyanza's existence.

3. Space precludes analyzing the Entebbe Figurine, found at a site some 35 kilometers south of Luzira, on the Entebbe peninsula and associated with the same Transitional Urewe variant as the Luzira Group (Ashley 2005:196) and with Entebbe ceramics. It represented male and female genitalia in a single, painted column (Posnansky and Chaplin 1968).

4. Andrew Reid, personal communication, January 15, 2015

5. The “bull” gloss refers to the importance of sexual activity in effective public healing (Mackay 1890:150).

6. A founding ancestor of the Lungfish clan, Mubiru Gabunga, is said to have placed a *kikomo* on the wrist of his “son” Ssematimba (Father of the Pythons), making him the clan’s head judge (Kaggwa 1972[1912]:38).

7. Scholarly opinion agrees that the Lungfish clan enjoys a considerable antiquity (Cohen 1972; Kodesh 2010).

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