

# Researching Uganda's national parks at the RAC

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# Introduction

My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center was conducted for my doctoral thesis which examines the history of the northern lowlands of Uganda's Albertine Rift Valley since the mid-nineteenth century. This area, which roughly corresponds to the modern-day district of Buliisa, has recently come to national and international attention as the location of some of the largest onshore crude oil fields discovered in Africa in the last few decades. Since the discoveries were made in 2006, conflict and tensions have arisen between and among communities, the state, and multi-national oil companies, over land, compensation and the anticipated revenues from the exploitation of this resource. But the lowlands have long been a site of struggle between different actors. It has for some time been the focus of particularly palpable, virulent, nervous and defensive strain of ethnic nativism. My thesis is a historical exploration of the ontological insecurity that has historically driven ethnic nativism and has itself been fuelled by ambiguity over ethnic self-identification and belonging in the valley. This study explores why this marginal place and the social identifications of the peoples who live there have become sites of unusually intense struggle.

Precarity and uncertainty to some degree inheres in the harsh if at times rewarding physical environment of the Northern Albertine Rift. But uncertainty has also been engendered by the multitude of haunting co-presences; of antecedent and alternative meanings which have been invested in the valley, and give this landscape the qualities of a palimpsest. Attempted superimpositions of meaning, each interacting with readings they built upon or sought to efface, seem to have long been a feature of this landscape's history. But these efforts to remake the valley have proliferated since the mid-nineteenth century as efforts to survive in, control, 'develop', extract from, and conserve these borderlands have exercised Africans and Europeans as part of imperialist, state-making,

conservationist, ethnic nativist and nationalist projects. These different ways of seeing the valley and its inhabitants have generated and been generated by a variety of representations, claims and interventions, which have at times driven conflict in the region. In particular, this thesis investigates the background to, and legacies of, one particular, critical and monumental medico-administrative intervention by the early colonial state which cleared the way for the eventual development of Murchison Falls National Park.

Whilst my thesis in part explores the disastrous consequences of the creation of Murchison Falls National Park for local residents in the lowlands, I seek, in chapters concerning the 1950s-1970s, to move beyond the narratives of victimhood that tend to dominate the historiography concerning the wildlife conservation in colonial and post-colonial Africa. Archival materials available at the RAC provide access to different African perspectives on the parks, thereby enabling a more nuanced understanding of the place of national parks in colonial and post-colonial Africa. This research report provides an overview of the existing historiography of African national parks and briefly discusses some of findings from my research at the RAC.

## Africans in the historiography of African national parks

National parks are frequently portrayed by the media as being under siege, their viability threatened by the voracious global demand for the ivory and mineral and petroleum resources contained within their boundaries. But these conservation areas have survived many crises since their formation, and have exhibited remarkable durability. The scholarship that has developed since the 1980s on the history and politics of Africa's national parks often attributes the survival of protected areas to African states' recognition of both the economic value of foreign tourists and these spaces' significance in state-making practices, the

influence of international conservation lobbies, and the widespread, extraverted pursuit of such organizations' resources.

But, as Elizabeth Garland argues, the literature has failed to consider the different discursive constructions that were produced by African engagements with Western conservation in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The historiography of colonial and early post-colonial wildlife conservation has tended to promulgate the notion that national parks were 'white playgrounds'; Africans are cast as dispossessed victims or anonymous functionaries. These assumptions owe much to the fact that the historiography is dominated by case studies from settler colonies such as Kenya and those of southern Africa. The illiberal traits of these territories have been imputed to all African colonial contexts, axiomatically rendering wildlife conservation a monolith of exclusion. The literature has largely been drawn into the 'postcolonial trap of simplistic divides'.<sup>2</sup> The possibility that Africans may have visited national parks, and been encouraged to do so has been obscured; as, therefore, have the variegated, polymorphous African responses prompted by such participation.

My research into the history of the Northern Albertine lowlands addresses this lacuna by exploring the case of the national parks of Uganda. One of the visions and related interventions to which the lowlands has been subject is that of 'wild Africa' – the belief that this is a pristine natural environment requiring protection from Africans. The parastatal Uganda National Parks (UNP), founded in the early 1950s, was the main proponent of this idea. But this was only one aspect of the way conservationists in Uganda saw the parks. The character of UNP was somewhat unusual by regional standards. Uganda in that period was British protectorate putatively benign by comparison with the administrations of neighboring settler colonies. In Uganda, the specific late colonial milieu provided the seedbed for a unique development which has long been obscured by stories about the devastation wrought in the country's national parks during the 1970s and the tumultuous subsequent decades.

In the 1950s and 1960s when the viability of Uganda's national parks was threatened by local hunters and modernist planners alike, UNP attempted to both understand the attitudes adjacent communities held towards these protected areas and inculcate an appreciation of wildlife conservation among educated African elites. In the 1960s, like many other Ugandan institutions in this period, UNP turned to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) for external support.

With the help of the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) Grant-in-Aid program, I spent a week at the RAC conducting research.<sup>3</sup> This time was spent searching through files from the archives of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF), the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation dating from the 1960s. The most relevant material was found in the RBF records including correspondence; unpublished and published reports; excerpts from the diaries of RBF officials visiting Uganda; and internal RBF memoranda (including docket memoranda) concerning UNP projects supported by the RBF, and other proposed initiatives. These materials represent a key source base in terms of both local, national and international perspectives on the parks. These materials reflect the tensions that developed in the 1960s and 1970s between and among different groups – local communities, national governments, African elites, local and foreign conservationists, and researchers – whose different claims over the Northern Albert lowlands were underpinned by particular ways of seeing and valuing this space.

## Aerni's report: applied anthropology meets wildlife conservation in Uganda

One key source for certain chapters of my doctoral thesis is a pioneering, unpublished study, of which a copy is held in the RAC's RBF records. Titled variously as 'Poaching and attitudes of local inhabitants towards wildlife in Uganda' and 'Man and Wildlife in Uganda', the study was conducted by

independent anthropologist Mary Jean Aerni (who later reverted to her maiden name Kennedy), over a period of ten months in 1968-1969 with funds from the RBF.

Aerni was not an Africanist and nor had she previously demonstrated interest in taking an anthropological perspective on wildlife conservation. Born in Berkeley, California in 1918, she spent her youth and attended high school in rural Los Gatos. She received a BA in Political Science from Stanford University in 1939 and had spells working for different public agencies and not-for-profit organizations in New York, Philadelphia and Washington DC during World War II. After the war she went to graduate school and was awarded her PhD in Cultural Anthropology in 1953 for which she wrote a dissertation titled 'Cultural Contact and Acculturation of the Southwestern Porno' on the basis of fieldwork conducted among one of the indigenous communities of California. The early years of Aerni's post-PhD life involved fieldwork in Pakistan, and a lectureship at Stanford before she married a Swiss economics professor, Agathon Ernst Aerni in 1960, and relocated to his home country.

In the mid-1960s Aerni found herself in Uganda, having accompanied her husband when he became an advisor to the Bank of Uganda as part of a technical assistance program run by the Swiss government. In Uganda, Kennedy looked around for opportunities, and occupied herself with making an ethnographic collection for the Robert H. Lowie Museum of Anthropology at Berkeley. She encountered the director of Uganda National Parks, Francis Katete, in about 1966, and 'became aware of the possible contribution of applied anthropology to conservation of the valuable wild life of East Africa as a national resource'.<sup>4</sup>

Aerni's study was written up and mimeographed but, for various reasons, was never published. The register, tone and content of Kennedy's rather unwieldy report – inspired by 'the ethnological sciences which have come to the fore in the past decade, as well as using the techniques of ethnology and social psychology'<sup>5</sup> – failed to meet either the requirements of academic reviewers or those of

practitioners within UNP seeking ways to ameliorate relations with local communities. RBF officers and the UNP's director and trustees complained that the report was 'more of a technical anthropological study than an approach to the immediate problems'.<sup>6</sup> The report's references to 'tribal cultures' and controversies concerning a hydro-electric project at Murchison Falls, made her report politically sensitive in the era of nation-building when discussions of 'tribe' was officially taboo and President Milton Obote's government railed against interference by 'neo-colonialists'.<sup>7</sup> In addition, when UNP director Katete was killed in a car accident in 1970, Kennedy lost her main advocate.

## African victims, agents and views: Aerni's report as a historical source

The report's very existence, and some of the aspects of Aerni's work that provoked negative reviews are what renders it a greatly significant source for my thesis, however. UNP's initial receptiveness to such an initiative reveals a great deal about the ethos of the organization, which was clear under the innovative and pro-active directorship (1964-1970) of Katete. The development and funding of a research project on these lines speaks of the faith researchers and organisations like Uganda National Parks (UNP) and the RBF had in social scientific research's direct application to practical – and highly political – problems such as conflict between parks organizations and local communities. Aerni developed the concept for this research project at the invitation of Katete, who was the first African on the continent to rise to the position of director of a parks service.

But the roots of UNP's unusual ethos lay in the colonial era. Katete's emergence and attitude were in part products of conditions specific to Uganda in the 1950s and early 1960s. Though park formation in Uganda was initiated from above by colonial state actors, African products of Western education were converts to the cause even before the parks were instituted. Interracial collaboration provided

the foundations for a pioneering public education program which encouraged and facilitated visits from school and college groups, chiefs, and local councils. Katete visited the parks for field courses during his undergraduate studies at Makerere University. He had become involved in wildlife conservation as a result of colonial-era efforts to build a constituency among Africans for national parks.

Correspondence and memoranda relating other RBF-UNP collaborations offer significant insights into the compound, shifting local meanings and associations which national parks were reconstituted from the 1950s to the 1970s as Africans encountered these spaces and representations thereof. Even before Aerni's research project, RBF was already the main external supporter of UNP through its involvement in education programs. This support, in terms of human and financial resources, was provided both through the African Wildlife Leadership Foundation (AWLF) and directly to UNP. In the mid-1960s, during his two-year tenure as warden responsible for education in Murchison Falls National Park, AWLF's Dietrich Schaaf developed on the extant public education program for visiting African groups. The RBF files reveal that the AWLF and UNP – to varying degrees – saw the importance of representing Uganda's national parks as projects of nation-building, of manufacturing citizens, and of pressing landscapes into service of a Ugandan national identity. A film titled 'Uganda, our nation's wealth' was made in collaboration between the AWLF and the New York Zoological Society, which was shown to African visitors at the parks.

But as the UNP and its partners tried to cast the parks as national symbols, local ethno-territorial claims on these spaces were channeled into anti-colonial and ethno-nationalist politics. And the continuing, elitist focus of UNP and its educational initiatives increasingly suffered criticism as the post-colonial Ugandan politicians and commentators moved towards socialist ideology in the mid-to late 1960s. According to Aerni, the Bantu-speaking lowland neighbors of Murchison Falls National Park referred to the protected area as *mujungu* – meaning 'white person' – a term reflecting their sense that this part of the lowlands had been physically and symbolically appropriated by whites, or the



*bajungu bairaguru*, the ‘black Europeans’, as the educated Africans were known locally.<sup>8</sup>

Aerni’s report is also an important source for the study of the lowland landscape beyond the boundaries of Murchison Falls National Park. Her study remains the only ethnographic investigation of the culture, economy and politics of the inhabitants of Wanseko, the major hub of the Lake Albert fishing industry, in north-western Bunyoro’s Bugungu Sub-County, bordering Murchison Falls National Park. Though often in the report Aerni shuns cultural relativism and lacks sympathy for the local communities she writes about, her discussion of Wanseko is rich in detail about socio-economic conditions, social memory, gender politics, inter-ethnic relations, local attitudes towards the national park, and the political economy of the Lake Albert fisheries. The study was unusual because it took as her main subject a marginal rural community whose collective sense of difference – reflected by the category Bagungu – had long been subsumed within other ethnic categories by anthropologists and officials unfamiliar with the area. Aerni’s research provides a unique – albeit mediated – glimpse into the forces and structures that impacted these marginal peoples’ ways of seeing themselves and the landscape they inhabited.

## Conclusion: the value of these collections

The vast Murchison Falls National Park resonated with a variety of alternative meanings and values for different groups in mid-twentieth century Uganda. Archival materials available at the RAC provide access to different African perspectives on the parks, and therefore permit a more nuanced understanding of the place of national parks in colonial and post-colonial Africa than those provided in the existing literature. This material provides a window on the frictions, tensions and collaborations involved in the attempted ‘Africanization’ and ‘nationalization’ of these spaces. In terms of content, these letters offer more

candid perspectives on the relationship between the government and the parastatal UNP than is provided in the latter's official reports.

Little exists in the way of archival collections relevant to the subject of Uganda's national parks in the 1960s in archives in the UK and Uganda. Aerni's report, and the accompanying correspondence between the RBF, Aerni and the UNP held at the RAC therefore represents a key source base for certain chapters of my doctoral thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Garland, 'The elephant in the room: confronting the colonial character of wildlife conservation in Africa', *African Studies Review* 51, no. 3 (2008), pp. 51-74.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Carruthers, 'Africa: Histories, Ecologies and Societies', *Environment and History* 10 (2004), pp. 379-406 (392-393).

<sup>3</sup> My research trip to the Rockefeller Archive Center took place from 5<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> of July 2016. While at the RAC, and during my earlier enquiries, I was fortunate to be assisted by archivist Monica S. Blank.

<sup>4</sup> James N. Hyde to Margaret Mead, April 8, 1970, Folder, 6129, Box 1008, Rockefeller Brothers Fund papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Jean Aerni to James Hyde, September 4, 1968, Folder 6127, Box 1007, Rockefeller Brothers Fund papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>6</sup> James N. Hyde to Margaret Mead, April 8, 1970, Folder 6129, Box 1008, Rockefeller Brothers Fund papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>7</sup> Emily Voorhis to William S. Moody, September 30, 1977, Folder 6129, Box 1008, Rockefeller Brothers Fund papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Jean Aerni, 'Man and wildlife in Uganda: An Anthropological study for Uganda National Parks', June, 1969, Folder 6129, Box 1008, Rockefeller Brothers Fund papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.