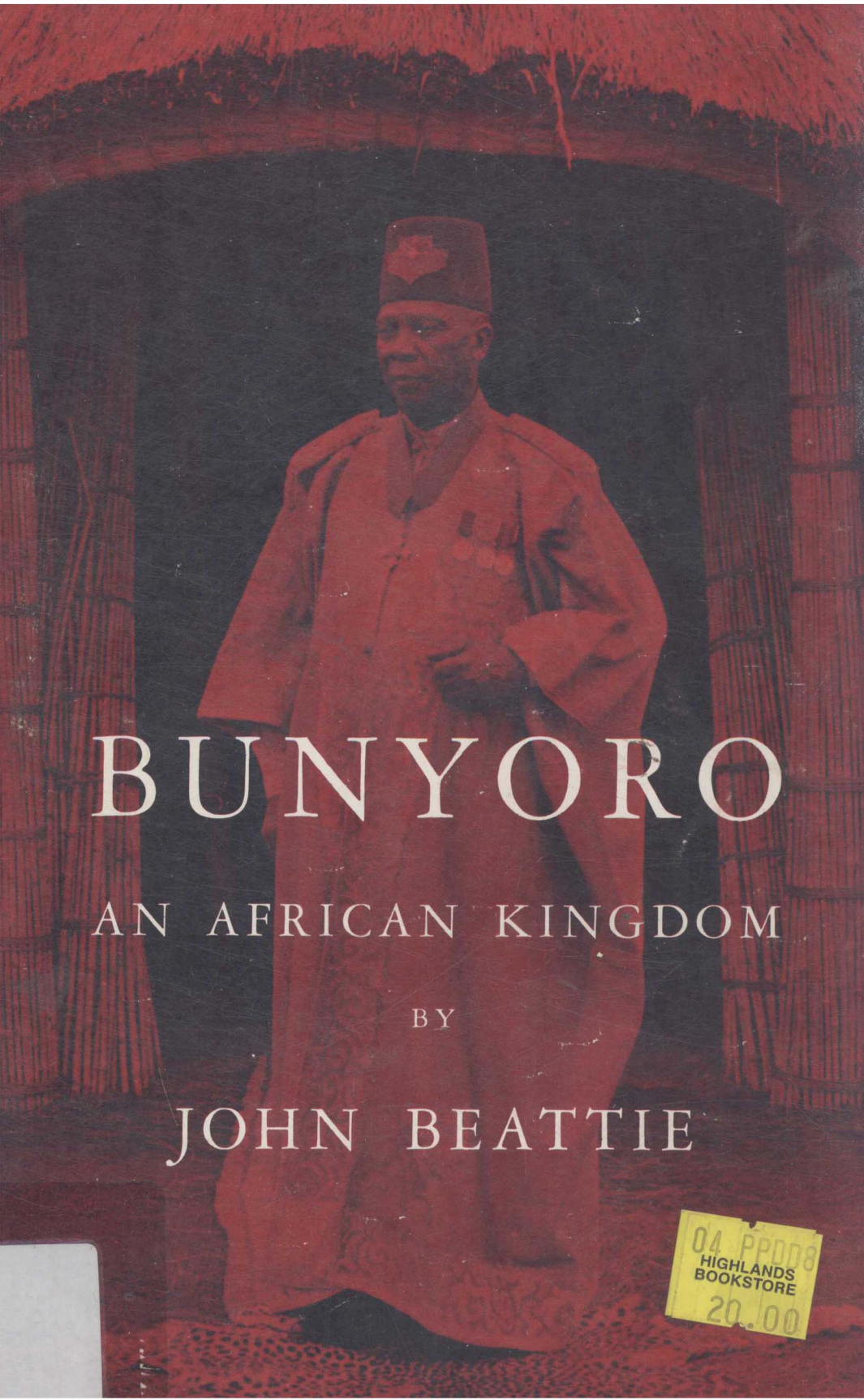

BUNYORO

AN AFRICAN KINGDOM

BY

JOHN BEATTIE

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An African Kingdom

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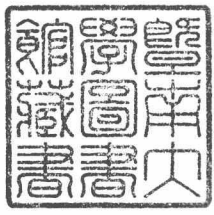
Oxford University



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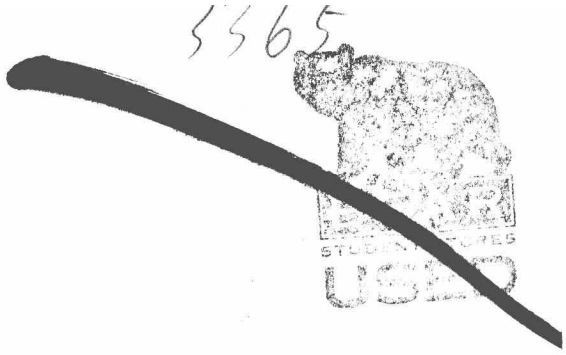


CASE STUDIES IN
CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

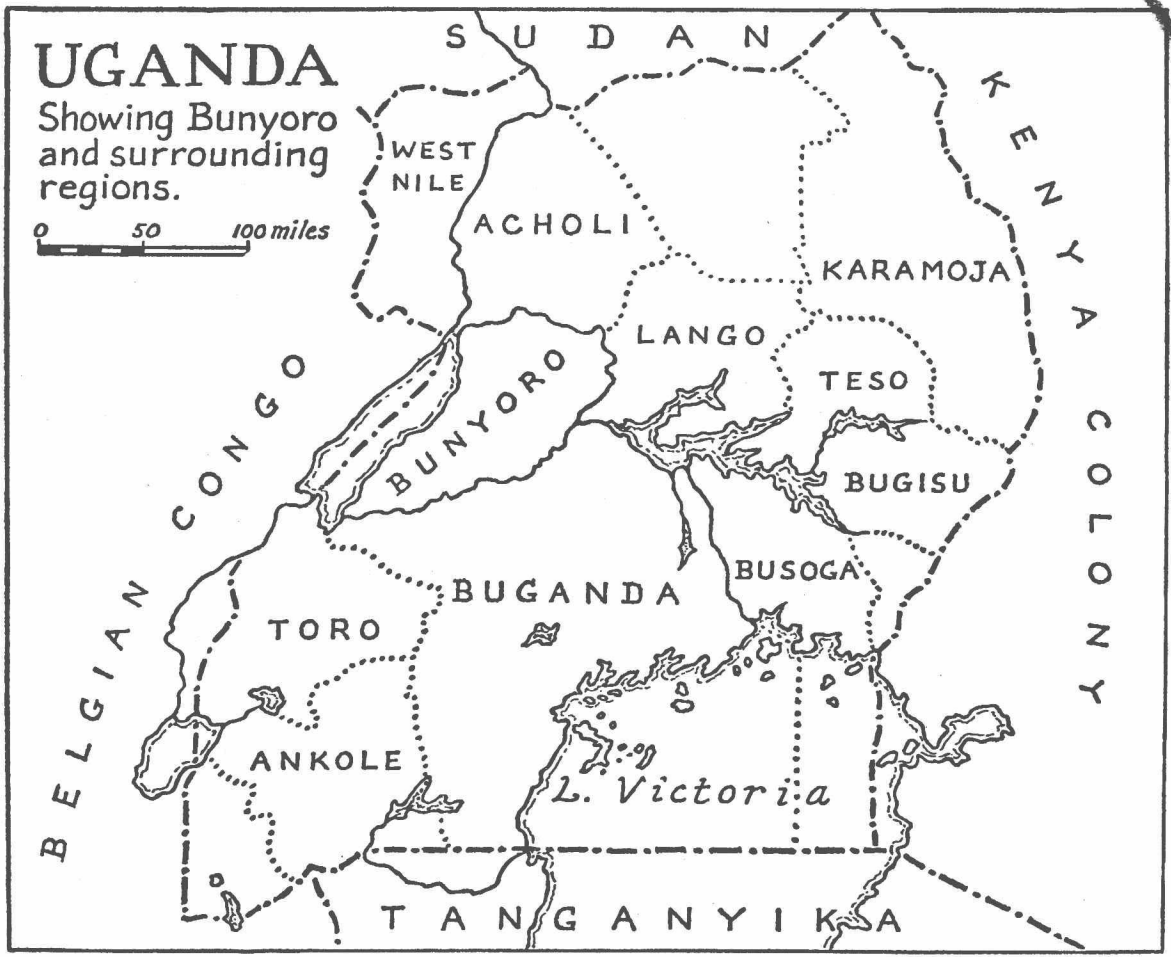
GENERAL EDITORS

George and Louise Spindler

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

BUNYORO

An African Kingdom



About the Author

JOHN BEATTIE received his D.Phil. in social anthropology from Oxford University, where he has taught since 1953. Previous to that he had taught philosophy at Trinity College, Dublin, for two years and then served as a district officer in Tanganyika for eight years before deciding to become a professional anthropologist. He is interested in philosophy, the methodology of the social sciences, and the ethnography of East Africa. He has published a number of theoretical papers as well as articles on aspects of Nyoro social life.

About the Book

This book is many things. It is a study of a feudal East African kingdom, with parallels to the England of William the Conqueror. It tells us of the conflict between feudal and bureaucratic administration and of that between European and traditional Nyoro standards of behavior. History can be important not only for the great civilizations, but also for the simpler, smaller-scale societies; this book amply demonstrates that this is true of the Nyoro. In their history, myth is transitional to fact, starting eighteen royal generations ago and continuing through 1862, when the grandfather of the present king was on the throne and the explorers Speke and Grant arrived on the scene, to the present, where the consequences of this history are seen in the present circumstances of the Nyoro people. But most importantly, this book is a case study of contemporary social relations within a complex and changing East African society. The social behavior of the Nyoro is analyzed in various significant dimensions—at the level of political action and legal control, in relationships between neighbors and between man and the supernatural, and within the system of reciprocal kinship obligations. Dr. Beattie has provided us with an unusual combination of historical perspective and functional analysis of a social system.

GEORGE AND LOUISE SPINDLER
General Editors

Stanford, California
December 1959

Foreword

THE FIELDWORK on which this book is based was carried out under the auspices of the Treasury Committee for Studentships in Foreign Languages and Cultures, London, and I owe much to their generosity and to the freedom they allowed me in planning my research. I spent altogether about twenty-two months in Bunyoro, spread over the years 1951 to 1955, living with the people and, after the first six months or so, working through the Nyoro language. For most of the time I employed one or two Nyoro research assistants, who were particularly helpful in assisting me to carry out detailed household and genealogical surveys in the four villages which I studied intensively. In obtaining information about the career histories of chiefs and about types of land holding I made use of a stenciled questionnaire form, and I had household survey forms printed, for use as a comprehensive *aide-mémoire* rather than as a formal instrument of research. I also invited literate Nyoro to write essays on topics selected by me, and awarded cash prizes for the best. I am greatly indebted to the many people who submitted long and interesting essays, and also to the eminent Nyoro who helped me to judge them.

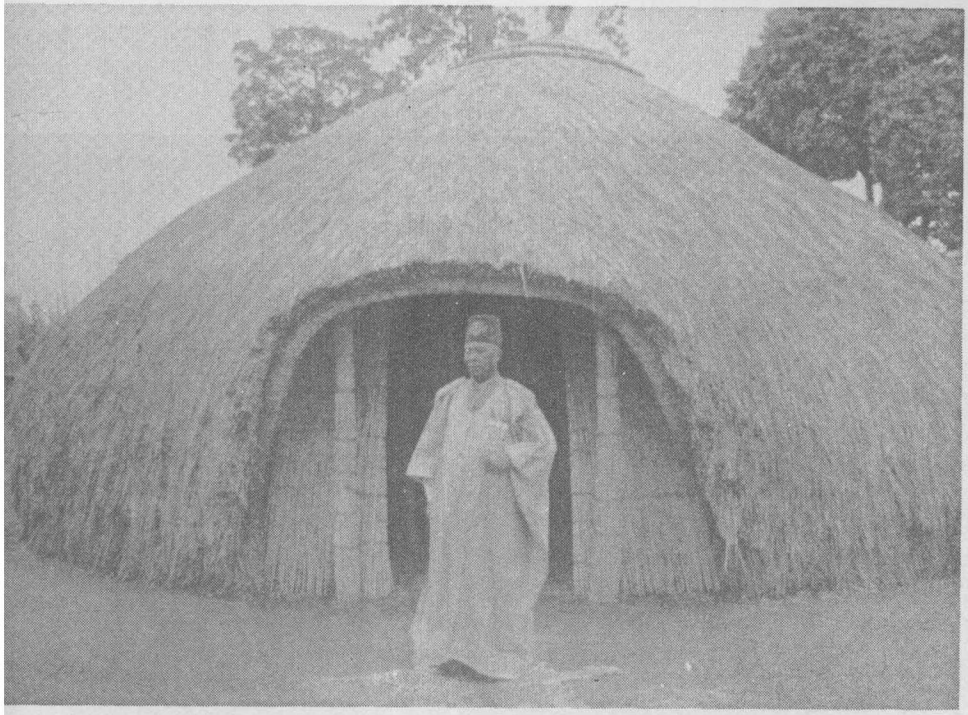
In carrying out fieldwork one incurs obligations to a great many people. I cannot acknowledge more than a few of these here, but I must record the willing help of the Mukama of Bunyoro, Sir Tito Winyi Gafabusa IV, C.B.E., and of many members, past and present, of his Native Government. I and my family also received much assistance and kindness from officers of the Protectorate Administration and their wives, also (and especially) from the representatives of the Church Missionary Society at Hoima. From the Director and members of the East African Institute of Social Research at Makerere College, Kampala, I received both hospitality and intellectual stimulus in generous measure. But my greatest field obligation is to my Nyoro assistants, and above all to the very many individual Nyoro of all classes who were my friends, companions, and teachers. If any of them should read this book, I should like them to know that I am well aware that no foreigner can hope

in the brief period of something less than two years to acquire a full understanding of the whole culture of another people, especially one as rich and complex as that of Bunyoro. I am not so arrogant as to claim to have done so. If I have learned something of a few of Bunyoro's most important social institutions and values, and if in the following pages I have succeeded in communicating some of this limited understanding to others, I have done all that I could have hoped to do.

Dr. John Peristiany, Professor I. Schapera, Dr. H. Meinhard, and Dr. Audrey Richards have commented helpfully on earlier drafts of various parts of this book. For valuable criticism of the present draft I am particularly indebted to my teacher, Professor Evans-Pritchard, and to Dr. R. G. Lienhardt and Dr. Rodney Needham.

J. B.

Oxford, England
December 1959



King (Mukama) of Bunyoro in front of one of his "palace" buildings.
(Photo: Department of Information, Uganda Protectorate.)

with traditional beehive-shaped house.

Banana beer being trodden out in banana grove.

Family with modern mud-plastered and iron-roofed house.

Air photograph of comparatively densely settled area a few miles from district headquarters, intersected by motor road. Note especially disposition of homesteads and gardens on raised areas separated by swampy streams. Scale approximately 3½ inches to one mile. (Photo: Hunting Aerosurveys Ltd.)

I

Introductory

THIS BOOK is intended to provide a brief general introduction to the social life of the Nyoro, a Bantu-speaking people who live in a fertile country of small hills and swampy valleys in the uplands of western Uganda, in east central Africa.[1] They number about 110,000, and occupy a region of about 4,700 square miles, so their country is not densely populated, less so in fact than the neighboring kingdoms of Buganda, Toro, and Ankole. But Nyoro are not evenly distributed over their territory; most of them live in fairly closely settled areas, separated by wide stretches of uninhabited bush. Though they do not live in compact villages, as some African peoples do, their homesteads, which typically consist of one or two mud-and-wattle houses around a central courtyard, surrounded by banana groves and food gardens, are rarely more than shouting distance from at least one neighbor. Every Nyoro belongs to one of a number of exogamous, totemic clans, membership of which is acquired in the paternal line.[2] But as these do not form distinct local groups, a man's neighbors generally include unrelated persons, as well as kinsmen and relatives-in-law.

Long ago Nyoro had great herds of cattle. But these have been practically wiped out by war and disease, and there are now only a few thousand

[1] Nyoro speak of themselves as *Banyoro* (singular Munyoro), their language as *Lunyoro,* and their country as *Bunyoro.* I omit the prefix, except in the last case, in the interest of simplicity.

[2] *Exogamous* (substantive *exogamy*) means "marrying outside," and implies that marriage is forbidden within a specified group, usually though not necessarily a *clan. Totemism* (adjective *totemic*) usually refers to a ritual association between specific social groups in a society (usually *clans*) and specific animate or inanimate objects, which are called *totems.* Where (as in Bunyoro and elsewhere in Africa) members of totemic groups are required to respect and to avoid injuring the totemic species, we may speak of *totemic avoidances.* A *clan* is usually a named group of people who believe themselves to be descended in one line (that is, either through males only or females only) from a common ancestor in the remote past. Members of the same clan usually have special obligations toward one another.

head, mostly in a favored corner of the country which is free from tsetse fly, carrier of the fatal cattle disease trypanosomiasis. At the present time the typical Nyoro is a small farmer, who cultivates from four to eight acres of land, and owns some goats and chickens and perhaps a few sheep. For food he grows millet (the traditional staple), sweet potatoes, cassava, and different kinds of peas and beans. Bananas he uses mainly for beer making. He grows cotton and tobacco as cash crops, and in a good year these may bring him two hundred shillings or more.[3] Some Nyoro are itinerant traders and shopkeepers, but most trade is still in the hands of the immigrant Indian community, as in other parts of East Africa.

Though Nyoro are not wealthy, they are not badly off by East African standards: most people have some good clothes, many have bicycles, and some own cars and lorries. In 1953 Nyoro men paid annual local and government taxes amounting to about 26 shillings. There are good main-road communications in the kingdom, and innumerable cycle paths and tracks. The main towns of Hoima (the capital) and Masindi have hospitals, and there are dispensaries at various points in the district. Education is almost wholly in the hands of the two main Christian missions, the Native Anglican Church (associated with the Church Missionary Society) and the Roman Catholic White Fathers. Literacy in Bunyoro is estimated as between 30 and 40 percent over the age of ten, but as yet only a minority of school children read beyond primary level.

Bunyoro is almost wholly "African." There are about 800 Indians, mostly engaged in retail trade. Only a few square miles are alienated to non-natives, mostly Indians. The hundred and forty or so Europeans are mostly employees of the Railways and Harbors administration, which handles the considerable traffic which passes between Uganda and the Sudan, via Lake Albert and the Nile. The British government, which administers the whole of the Uganda Protectorate, is represented in Bunyoro by a district commissioner stationed at Hoima, and two or three assistants. There are also a few departmental officers, responsible for agriculture, veterinary matters, police work, fisheries, and so on. But the indigenous Nyoro people form the mass of the population.

The Bunyoro native government operates under the general supervision and control of the British administration. At its head is the hereditary ruler of Bunyoro, the king or Mukama. Nowadays he is advised by a central secretariat, consisting of a prime minister, a chief justice, and a treasurer. He is the head of a graded hierarchy of territorial chiefs, of whom the most important are the four county chiefs, each responsible for one of the four districts into which the country is divided. Beneath them are the subcounty chiefs, and below them again are the "parish" chiefs and the village headmen. So Bunyoro is, as it is said always to have been, a centralized, hierarchically organized state, with the Mukama at the apex of the pyramid of traditional authority, and the hundred and fifty or so village headmen at its base. In pre-European

[3] The shilling, made up of a hundred cents, is the standard coin in East Africa. Twenty of them make a pound. Approximately seven shillings equal one American dollar.

times the Mukama was thought of as the ultimate source of all political authority; nowadays everybody knows that he is subject to the superior authority of the European administration. This of course has important effects on traditional attitudes toward the Mukama and his chiefs.

Not much can be said of Nyoro origins. The orthodox view is that the original inhabitants of the country were negroid agriculturalists, and it is supposed that the impact on these of successive waves of immigrants, some at least of whom were pastoral, has resulted both in the wide range of physical type and in the strongly marked distinction between rulers and ruled which are now characteristic of the peoples of this part of Africa. Throughout this region the pastoral Hima invaders (called Huma in Bunyoro) assumed the role of overlords, dominating the indigenous Iru, or peasant peoples, who form the governed majority. But for Bunyoro this is an oversimplification. Although the cattle-herding Huma have always regarded themselves as superior to Iru, in Bunyoro the matter was complicated many generations ago by the arrival from the north of the Nile of a third element, the Bito, whose affinities are with the non-Bantu Acholi and Alur of present-day Uganda. These darker-skinned Nilotic invaders took over the Nyoro kingship from an earlier dynasty, and the present Mukama claims to be the twenty-sixth Bito king. Much of the prestige and authority associated in the more southerly kingdoms of the region (which the Bito did not reach) with the Hima attaches in Bunyoro to the Bito, especially to members of its royal lineage.[4] But although status distinctions are strongly marked in Bunyoro, we do not find there the rigid, castelike discrimination described for some neighboring peoples such as the Ankole, and it has always been at least theoretically possible for able Nyoro commoners to rise to positions of high authority in the state.

Nyoro believe that their kingdom was once much greater than it is now, and that their Mukama is the direct descendant in the male line of the ancient rulers of an empire which extended over most of present-day Uganda and perhaps beyond it. We cannot now say much about this ancient state, or even be quite sure that it ever existed, but we may be certain that if it did it was not a compact political unit, but rather a loose association of semi-independent states connected with the central kingdom through the sporadic payment of tribute. It is certain, however, that in historical times Nyoro territory has been much reduced both by the British and by the neighboring Ganda. Nyoro are very conscious of their former greatness, and we shall find that present-day Bunyoro cannot be understood unless we know something about its traditional political system and about the historical events that have befallen it. For the past determines the present, and attitudes and values which were appropriate to the traditional system still survive in the radically altered social and political scene of today.

[4] A *lineage* consists of all the descendants in one line (that is, either through males only or through females only) of a particular person through a specified number of generations. It differs from a *clan* in that while usually all the members of a lineage know exactly how they are related to all the other members of it, and together they often form a corporate group, clan members may not be able to trace genealogical links with other clan members, and often clansfolk are widely dispersed.

These are some of the elementary and essential facts concerning the people whom this book is about; it may still be asked "What are Nyoro really like?" We shall be better able to answer this question, if it is the kind of question that can be answered at all, at the end of our study of their social institutions. But a good many Europeans, from the time of the first contacts just a century ago until the present, have passed judgment on Nyoro character, and it is a fact of considerable anthropological interest that almost all of these judgments have been unfavorable. Thus a nineteenth-century writer described the Nyoro (whom he had never seen) as "mean, grasping and selfish"; a lady missionary reported that work was repugnant to them and that nothing attracted them irresistibly save indolence and ease; and officials and missionaries have referred from time to time to their "apathy," "decadence," "habits of intemperance," and "evident sense of inferiority." Usually assertions like these tell one more about the persons who make them than about the people they are made about. In any case it is the existence and origin of such opinions, rather than their truth or falsehood, that interest anthropologists. I must say here, however, that I found Nyoro to be very courteous, hospitable, and generous people. Most of them are quick witted, thoughtful, and humorous, and many have in recent years achieved high distinction by European standards.

But there is still in Bunyoro a widespread underlying fear and distrust of Europeans. This is rarely explicit, and certainly there is no overt hostility: relations between individual Europeans and Nyoro are usually good and often excellent. But it is widely believed among the less educated majority that Europeans dislike Nyoro and are hostile to their interests, and this is bound to lead to some mutual distrust and suspicion. Some of the grounds for this belief are considered in Chapter 2. Though I lived in close social contact with Nyoro, and have many Nyoro friends, very few trusted me completely (why should they?), and those who did were mostly younger men. Right up to the end of my stay in the country many of my best friends continued to deny firmly that such things as sorcery and divination could possibly occur nowadays, despite ample and continuous evidence to the contrary. They knew, of course, that I knew about these things, but it was better not to talk about them. We shall see why when we come to Chapter 7.

There are many good reasons why the kingdom of Bunyoro is worth studying, but four of them are especially relevant here. The first applies to all studies of peoples remote from ourselves. It is that we have here a community of real people, who have, so far as we can tell, pretty much the same innate constitution and capacities as any other people, and yet who have developed their own distinctive social system and way of life. As members of the same human family, we are bound to be interested in the very different ways of life which other peoples have worked out for themselves. And in the case of preliterate or only recently literate societies, our interest must be an urgent one, for rapid industrial and technological advance are quickly destroying or altering many of them, so that soon perhaps there will be none of them left to study.

Turning from general considerations to more particular ones, a second

reason why Bunyoro is worth studying is just because it is the kind of kingdom it is. Although it is changing rapidly, it still preserves many of the characters of a centralized, "feudal" state, oddly reminiscent in many ways of the feudal kingdoms which existed centuries ago in Europe and elsewhere. I use the word "feudal" here in its simplest sense, to refer to the kind of political system which is based on the relation between a superior and his inferior or vassal, where the latter holds lands, and authority over the people living on these lands, "in feud" from the former. This means that the vassal must render homage and services of various kinds (the onus of which will chiefly fall on his peasant dependants) to the superior lord from whom he holds his lands and authority. Traditional Bunyoro has many features in common with such a system, and we shall find that many attitudes and values appropriate to it still survive in present-day Bunyoro, though not always very harmoniously. Thus a second reason for studying Bunyoro is that it has, or had until quite recently, a type of social structure having many points of resemblance with kinds of societies known to us in history. Perhaps we may acquire a clearer understanding of certain features of our own historical past by studying such present-day "feudal" states as Bunyoro.

But Bunyoro, like other recently preliterate societies, is undergoing radical change as a result of contact with a powerful and complex Western culture, and this is a third reason why it should be studied. A living culture is always something more than "a thing of shreds and patches"; in at least some respects it is a systematic whole, as we indicate by giving it a name. This does not mean that its parts all fit neatly together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, as certain "functionalist" anthropologists seem sometimes to have supposed. In times of change it often happens that incompatible beliefs and institutions come to coexist, and when this happens various kinds of conflicts may arise. This has occurred in Bunyoro as it has in other societies; perhaps more acutely than in most. So here we can write an actual case history of social change; we can record what happens when a coherent social system is subjected to the often disruptive impact of European civilization.

The fourth important reason for studying Bunyoro is its ethnographic representativeness. Almost the whole of the vast region between the great lakes of Victoria, Albert, and Tanganyika is occupied by centralized native states; these vary greatly in size but have very similar constitutions. They are all hereditary monarchies; they all have strongly marked, sometimes extreme, distinctions of class and status; and they are all hierarchically organized. All these peoples speak related Bantu languages, and it has become usual in ethnographic literature to refer to them collectively (and also to a few other peoples in the area who traditionally lack centralized government) as the interlacustrine Bantu. Although Bunyoro differs from some of these states in important respects, it resembles them in many more, and may even be said to be typical. So in studying Bunyoro we are not simply studying a unique culture, though one with historical analogues: in analyzing it we are informing ourselves of many of the essential characters of the type of native states which have for centuries occupied this vast and populous region of Africa.

These are some reasons why it is worthwhile to learn about Bunyoro; it

remains to make clear what kind of study is proposed for this book. Since anthropology means different things to different people, it is important that the author make clear what he is attempting. The first thing that must be said is that since this book is written by a social anthropologist, it will be mostly about social relations; that is, about the ways in which Nyoro generally behave towards and think about one another. The word "generally" is important: the social anthropologist is not interested in every social relationship that he can discover, only in those which are "institutionalized," standardized, and hence characteristic of the people being studied. In Bunyoro, as in every other society, there are special patterns of behavior and special attitudes and ways of thinking which are held to be appropriate in dealings between people who belong to certain categories (such as chiefs, diviners, clansmen, strangers, fathers, sons, neighbors, and so on). If this were not the case, ordered social life would be impossible, for people's behavior would be unpredictable. We may say that in our study we are primarily concerned with the statuses and roles which are characteristic of Bunyoro. We are interested in the kinds of people there are and the kinds of things they are expected to do, rather than in the particular individuals who happen to occupy particular statuses at a particular time. Of course we are interested in real people (these are the raw material of our study), but our concern is with what these real people share with other real people—that is, with their common culture, rather than with what is unique and peculiar to them as individuals. And this common culture includes their shared framework of social relations, and their beliefs and values. It is because this book is centered on social relations that its four central chapters are concerned respectively with the king, the chiefs, relatives, and neighbors. For relationships centering on some or all of these four categories of persons comprise for most Nyoro practically the whole ambit of their social life.

A concern with social relations does not, however, imply neglect of "culture." No adequate description of a social relationship can omit reference to the ideas and beliefs which the parties to it have about themselves and about one another; this kind of mental content is a large part of what culture means. The main focus of our interest will be in social relationships, but we shall be concerned with other aspects of Nyoro culture insofar as they help us to understand these relationships. Thus Chapter 2 deals with the past and with Nyoro ideas about it, rather than with contemporary social relationships, for we cannot fully understand the latter unless we know something about Nyoro history and their ideas about it. In the same way, Nyoro beliefs about the supernatural, discussed in Chapter 7, are cultural data, but we shall see that many of them play a very important part in interpersonal relations. Though a good deal has been said and written about the difference between culture and society, it is really very much a question of relevance; to give a coherent account of anything it is necessary to deal with it from one point of view at a time, and in this book we study the kingdom of Bunyoro primarily in its aspect as a working system of interpersonal relations.