
KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

HISTORICAL LEGACIES AND PROTRACTED CONFLICTS IN THE RWENZORI SUB-REGION OF UGANDA

Isaiah Eitu¹, Joel Isabirye², Aaron Katunguka³ & Charles Agenonga⁴

^{1,3,4} Valley University of Science and Technology, Bushenyi, Uganda.

² Kampala International University.

Emails: ¹ eituisaiah@gmail.com, ² joel@joelisabirye.com, ³ akatunguka@gmail.com, ⁴ cagenonga@gmail.com

Citation: Eitu et al. (2025). Historical legacies and protracted conflicts in the Rwenzori sub-region of Uganda *KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(2), 203-215.

ABSTRACT

Violence in Uganda's Rwenzori sub-region is often presented as a series of separate security crises, including the Rwenzururu rebellion, the Allied Democratic Forces insurgency, recurrent clashes, and the 2016 royal palace attack. This article instead examines Kasese, Bundibugyo, and Ntoroko as a historically connected conflict system shaped by struggles over authority, identity, recognition, territory, and state legitimacy. Guided by Edward Azar's Protracted Social Conflict Theory, the study applies a qualitative historical-analytical design and interpretive documentary analysis. Five recurring patterns emerge: identity-based exclusion, demands for cultural recognition and self-government, coercive state responses, contestation over symbolic authority and cultural space, and intergenerational transmission of historical grievances. The findings show that administrative reforms and security interventions have often contained violence without resolving its underlying causes. Durable peace therefore requires historically informed reconciliation, political inclusion, negotiated cultural recognition, conflict-sensitive governance, and socioeconomic measures that reduce the remobilization of inherited grievances across generations and communities.

Keywords: Protracted conflict, Rwenzori, Uganda, Identity, Governance, Historical legacies

INTRODUCTION

Public discussion of political violence frequently begins with the most visible moment: an attack, a military operation, an arrest, a disputed cultural ceremony, or a confrontation between a community and the state. That event-centered approach is understandable because violent episodes demand immediate explanation. Yet it can also narrow the analysis. In regions where conflict repeatedly returns after periods of apparent calm, the more important question is not only why violence happens on a particular day, but why the political and social relationships capable of producing that violence has endured for generations. Azar's (1990) concept of protracted social conflict is useful precisely because it shifts

attention from the incident to the deeper system of unmet communal needs, exclusion, weak institutions, and contested state society relations that allow conflict to reproduce itself over time.

Uganda's Rwenzori sub-region offers a particularly revealing case. The region, especially present-day Kasese, Bundibugyo, and Ntoroko districts, has experienced repeated struggles involving cultural identity, political representation, territorial authority, armed rebellion, and state coercion. Reuss and Titeca (2016) caution against explaining western Uganda's violence through ethnicity alone, showing instead that local political struggles, institutional competition, and historical grievances intersect in complex ways. The Rwenzururu

movement emerged within this environment from longstanding Bakonzo and Bamba opposition to political subordination under the Toro Kingdom.

Later armed movements, including the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda and the Allied Democratic Forces, operated in and around the same difficult borderland environment. The political landscape changed again as disputes surrounding cultural institutions and local authorities intensified. Khisa and Rwengabo (2022) place the more recent violence within a fragmented regional politics in which cultural, electoral, institutional, and security tensions became increasingly entangled. These episodes differed in leadership, ideology, timing, and immediate causes, but they repeatedly returned to unresolved questions of recognition, authority, belonging, and the terms on which communities relate to the Ugandan state.

The historical depth of these tensions matters. Political authority in the Rwenzori area was contested before colonial rule, and colonial administration subsequently reworked those relationships through indirect rule and territorial incorporation. Syahuka-Muhindo and Titeca (2016) show how the struggle for Rwenzururu developed from a long experience of political and cultural subordination under Toro authority. The issue was therefore never merely administrative. It became bound up with political representation, cultural dignity, and the enduring question of who possessed the right to govern and represent.

Post independence governments inherited many territorial and institutional arrangements created under colonial rule. The broader significance of that inheritance is captured by Mamdani (1996), whose analysis of indirect rule shows how colonial systems of local authority could outlive colonialism itself. In Rwenzori, later district creation and recognition of cultural institutions changed important aspects of governance, but neither automatically erased accumulated memories of exclusion nor settled

competing claims among communities within the region.

The problem, therefore, is not the absence of state intervention. The Rwenzori region has experienced administrative restructuring, political negotiations, cultural recognition, security deployments, arrests, military operations, and development initiatives. The deeper difficulty is that many interventions have addressed the manifestation of conflict more effectively than the relationships that sustain it. A new district can improve representation while leaving disputes over identity unresolved. Recognition of one cultural institution can satisfy one community while being interpreted by another as a threat to its own political or territorial security. A military operation can suppress armed actors yet deepen collective memories of victimization. In a protracted conflict setting, actions intended to solve one problem may unintentionally become part of the next grievance cycle.

This article examines how historical legacies have shaped and reproduced protracted social conflict in Uganda's Rwenzori sub-region. Its central purpose is to generate context-specific insight into the relationship between historical governance, identity exclusion, cultural recognition, state responses, and recurrent conflict. The analysis is guided by one broad question: how have historical and institutional legacies contributed to the persistence and reproduction of conflict in Kasese, Bundibugyo, and Ntoroko? More specifically, the article considers how governance restructuring affected communal inclusion, why cultural recognition became such a durable mobilizing claim, how coercive responses altered state-community relations, and how unresolved historical losses continue to influence present-day conflict narratives.

The article makes three related arguments. First, contemporary conflict in Rwenzori cannot be adequately understood without recognizing the cumulative effects of precolonial struggles, colonial incorporation, and postcolonial state formation.

Second, identity and cultural recognition in the region are not peripheral or merely symbolic concerns; they have been tied to political participation, dignity, security, and the right to exercise authority. Third, repeated reliance on securitized responses has at times contained violence while simultaneously reinforcing the perceptions of exclusion and collective punishment that Protracted Social Conflict Theory identifies as central to conflict persistence. The contribution of the article is therefore interpretive as much as historical: it connects events that are often studied separately and demonstrates how institutions, collective memory, and unmet identity needs interact across time.

Historical and conceptual context

Long-running conflicts are rarely sustained by material deprivation alone. Communities also mobilize memories, dignity, fear, belonging, and narratives of injustice. Gurr (2000) shows that collective grievances become politically consequential when groups understand their disadvantage as systematic and tied to their communal identity. This is important in Rwenzori because grievances over authority and recognition have often been narrated not simply as individual political complaints but as experiences shared by entire communities. Recognition, security, participation, and identity are particularly difficult to negotiate as though they were ordinary divisible interests. Burton (1997) argues that conflicts involving fundamental human needs cannot be resolved through bargaining alone because the issues touch how groups understand their survival and place within a political community. This helps explain why administrative concessions may reduce tension without fully settling a conflict when the deeper question of dignity or recognition remains unresolved.

African state formation gives these concerns a particular historical weight. Colonial governments frequently ruled through selected authorities, hardened ethnic categories, and created

administrative boundaries that did not necessarily correspond to local ideas of political community. Mamdani's (1996) account of decentralized despotism is particularly useful here because it explains how indirect rule produced differentiated forms of citizenship and authority whose effects survived formal colonialism. Territorial control also matters because the state is experienced through the way authority is organized locally. Boone (2003) demonstrates that institutional choices over territory and local political authority have had lasting consequences for state power and conflict across Africa. This insight is relevant to Rwenzori, where administrative boundaries and cultural jurisdictions became part of the struggle over who could legitimately govern particular communities.

Herbst (2000) further shows that the uneven extension of authority across African territory has shaped the relationship between states and peripheral regions. The Rwenzori case reflects this wider problem but adds its own complexity: cultural authority, borderland geography, insurgency, and memories of violent state intervention converge within the same regional political space. The restoration of cultural institutions in Uganda after 1993 created new opportunities for recognition but also exposed unresolved questions about the relationship between cultural identity and political authority. In Rwenzori, recognition of the Rwenzururu Kingdom in 2009 was historically significant, yet it did not end contestation. Khisa and Rwengabo (2022) show that violence in the region has also been shaped by political fragmentation and competing claims within a socially diverse environment. Bakonzo, Bamba, Basongora, and other communities hold overlapping histories, identities, and territorial claims. Recognition can therefore repair a long-standing injury for one group while simultaneously generating insecurity among others.

Protracted Social Conflict Theory

Edward Azar's Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) Theory provides the principal analytical framework for this study. Azar (1990) developed the concept to explain conflicts that endure because communal groups experience persistent denial of basic needs within political systems unable or unwilling to accommodate them. Four elements are especially relevant: communal content, deprivation of human needs, the role of governance and the state, and international linkages. PSC does not suggest that every historical grievance necessarily produces violence. Rather, it explains how conflict becomes durable when identity groups repeatedly encounter insecurity, exclusion, weak access to institutions, and adversarial relations with governing authorities.

The theory is particularly appropriate for Rwenzori because the region's conflict history repeatedly returns to questions of who is recognized, who governs, whose institutions are legitimate, and how the state responds when communities challenge existing arrangements. The theory also cautions against assuming that coercive capacity is equivalent to conflict resolution. A state may defeat an armed group or restore physical order without transforming the underlying conditions that generated mobilization. In such circumstances, what appears to be peace may be closer to suppressed conflict: the visible confrontation declines, but the grievances, memories, and institutional relationships remain available for future political activation.

At the same time, PSC theory is used here as an interpretive lens rather than a complete explanation of every episode. Political elites, electoral competition, land pressures, economic interests, armed entrepreneurship, and cross-border insecurity also matter. Reuss and Titeca (2016), for example, caution against reducing violence in western Uganda to ethnicity alone. That warning is important. Identity does not operate outside politics; it is interpreted, organized, and

sometimes manipulated through institutions and leadership. The analytical value of PSC lies in showing why these mobilizations find such durable social foundations when historical grievances and unmet recognition needs have accumulated over time.

Methods

Research design

The study adopted a qualitative historical analytical design. This approach was appropriate because the research question concerns continuity and change across long periods rather than the measurement of a single contemporary event. Historical analysis made it possible to trace how earlier arrangements of political authority were remembered, challenged, modified, and reproduced under later governments.

The article also employed an interpretive orientation. Its concern was not only whether particular events occurred, but how those events acquired political meaning within later struggles. For example, the placement of Bakonzo and Bamba areas under Toro authority matters institutionally, but it also matters because subsequent generations interpreted that arrangement through narratives of domination and denied recognition.

Data sources

The analysis drew on secondary documentary material covering the political and conflict history of the Rwenzori sub-region. The source base included peer-reviewed scholarship, academic books, historical accounts, conflict-mapping and institutional reports, and human-rights documentation. Sources were selected because they addressed one or more of the study's core concerns: the Rwenzururu movement, cultural institutions, state formation, armed insurgency, identity politics, governance, or episodes of violence in Kasese, Bundibugyo, and Ntoroko. Rather than treating any single text as authoritative, the study read materials across categories and historical periods in order to identify

recurring patterns, points of disagreement, and changes in interpretation over time.

Analytical procedure

Documentary material was read thematically and chronologically. The first stage reconstructed major periods of political change: precolonial contestation, colonial incorporation under Toro authority, the Bayola uprising, the formation and evolution of the Rwenzururu movement, post-independence administrative change, the restoration and recognition of cultural institutions, insurgent activity, and the violent confrontations of the 2010s.

The second stage involved thematic coding around concepts derived from PSC theory and from patterns emerging from literature. Five themes became dominant: governance restructuring and exclusion; cultural recognition and self-government; coercive state responses; symbolic authority and cultural space; and unresolved historical losses and intergenerational memory. The analysis then examined relationships among these themes.

The final stage compared the Rwenzori patterns with findings from selected African cases in order to assess the wider explanatory usefulness of PSC theory. This was an analytical comparison rather than a formal comparative case-study design.

Methodological limitations

Because the study relies on documentary evidence, it does not claim to reproduce the full range of contemporary community perspectives in Kasese, Bundibugyo, or Ntoroko. Published sources also reflect the priorities and limitations of their authors, and accounts of politically sensitive events may differ. The historical record itself is contested, particularly where narratives of origin, territory, victimization, and cultural authority are involved.

Results

Governance restructuring

The first major finding is that political restructuring repeatedly altered who could exercise authority in

the Rwenzori region without fully resolving questions of consent and representation. The roots of this problem predate formal colonial rule. Bayanda (2015) traces the changing political landscape associated with the secession of Olimi Kaboyo from Bunyoro-Kitara in the nineteenth century, a development that contributed to contested authority over communities in the mountain region. Colonial intervention later hardened these relationships by governing Bakonzo and Bamba areas through the Toro Kingdom. What appeared administratively convenient within indirect rule was experienced locally as political subordination.

The importance of this arrangement lies in its institutional and psychological consequences. When communities are governed through an authority, they do not consider representative, exclusion is not limited to the absence of office-holding. It affects everyday encounters with taxation, dispute settlement, land administration, cultural expression, and access to political voice. Over time, an administrative grievance can become an identity narrative in which political disadvantage is understood as something attached to who the community is. The Bayola Revolution of 1919-1921 illustrates that resistance to these arrangements was already deeply rooted before the later Rwenzururu movement emerged (Madinah, 2018).

Independence did not produce an immediate institutional break with this legacy. Postcolonial governments inherited territorial boundaries and centralized habits of political authority. Later district creation and decentralization changed the administrative map and opened new spaces for local representation, but they did not automatically eliminate the historical meaning attached to earlier subordination. Sseremba (2020) shows how ethnicity and political competition in Uganda can become mutually reinforcing when institutional arrangements fail to resolve deeper questions of inclusion. Administrative reform can therefore

redistribute offices and services while older grievances continue to shape how communities evaluate the state.

The evidence therefore points to a layered form of exclusion. At one level, there were concrete institutional concerns involving representation and authority. At another, those concerns became part of an inherited collective story about marginalization. The two reinforced each other. A contemporary political dispute could be interpreted through an older narrative of domination, while an older grievance could gain new relevance when current institutions appeared unresponsive. This is one mechanism through which conflict became protracted rather than episodic.

Cultural recognition and self-government

The second finding is the remarkable persistence of demands for cultural recognition and self-government. From resistance to Toro authority to the Rwenzururu movement formed in the early 1960s, recognition was repeatedly presented as a solution to political and cultural subordination (Syahuka-Muhindo & Titeca, 2016). The walkout from the Toro parliament and subsequent petitions to colonial and postcolonial authorities indicate that local actors did not move immediately or exclusively toward armed struggle. They used institutional channels, political negotiation, symbolic assertion, and eventually alternative structures of authority. This history complicates interpretations that portray Rwenzururu solely as rebellion. It was also a long political argument about representation and the legitimacy of cultural self-rule.

The declaration of the Rwenzururu Kingdom in 1964 embodied this argument. Even without immediate state recognition, the institution offered an alternative source of collective legitimacy. It gave political form to a shared claim that the Bakonzo and related constituencies possessed a history and identity that could not be adequately represented through Toro structures. In PSC terms,

this demand combined several needs that are analytically distinct but socially intertwined: identity, participation, dignity, and security. Recognition mattered not simply because communities wanted a ceremonial king, but because recognition signaled that their history and collective standing were acknowledged within the national political order.

The restoration of kingdoms in Uganda after 1993 reopened this question in a new constitutional and political environment. The eventual official recognition of Charles Wesley Mumbere as Omusinga of Rwenzururu in 2009 was therefore a major historical concession (Reuss & Titeca, 2017). Yet the result also shows why recognition alone cannot be assumed to end protracted conflict. By the time formal recognition occurred, the region's political landscape had changed. Other communities had their own identities, institutions, and fears. The meaning of Rwenzururu was no longer determined only by the relationship between Bakonzo and the Toro Kingdom; it was also shaped by local electoral competition, district boundaries, land claims, and relations with Bamba, Basongora, and other groups.

This produced a difficult paradox. A measure designed to correct one historical exclusion could generate new anxieties if neighboring communities interpreted it as extending territorial or political claims over them. The recognition of Bwamba cultural institutions likewise carried different meanings for different constituencies. For the Bamba, it could represent emancipation and cultural equality. For some Bakonzo actors, it could appear to fragment an older political project or challenge the symbolic reach of Rwenzururu. The finding is not that cultural recognition causes conflict. Rather, recognition becomes conflict-sensitive when multiple groups occupy the same administrative space and attach different political meanings to cultural institutions.

Repeated Coercive responses deepened adversarial relations

A third recurring pattern is the use of coercion as a principal means of restoring order. Colonial suppression of the Bayola revolt established an early precedent in which resistance to political arrangements was answered militarily. Post-independence governments also faced genuine armed threats in the region, including NALU and the ADF. Tshimba (2020) emphasizes the difficult relationship between state authority and society in the Rwenzori region, where armed insecurity, contested political legitimacy, and cross-border dynamics repeatedly overlapped. A historically grounded analysis must therefore avoid the opposite simplification of treating every state use of force as unprovoked repression.

The central finding, however, is that the political effects of coercion often extended beyond the immediate security objective. When force is experienced as indiscriminate, excessive, or directed against institutions with collective symbolic importance, it can alter how entire communities interpret the state. This dynamic was dramatically illustrated by the November 2016 security operation against the Rwenzururu royal palace. Human Rights Watch (2017) and other accounts documented large-scale loss of life, arrests, and the detention of King Mumbere. Whatever the immediate security calculations surrounding the operation, its symbolic setting mattered profoundly: the confrontation occurred at the palace of an institution whose recognition had itself been the outcome of a decades-long struggle.

For many observers and community members, this transformed a security confrontation into a story about the relationship between the state and Bakonzo identity. A localized conflict becomes harder to resolve when coercive action is interpreted through historical memories of earlier suppression. Young people who did not personally experience the Bayola uprising or the early

Rwenzururu rebellion may nevertheless inherit narratives that connect those events to contemporary state violence. The state may understand each operation as a response to a different threat, while affected communities perceive a recurring pattern. These competing historical frames can coexist, and their divergence itself becomes part of the conflict.

Comparative African evidence helps explain why coercion can become part of the conflict it is meant to resolve. In the Niger Delta, state responses to militancy interacted with long-standing grievances over political exclusion and resource control, at times strengthening narratives of injustice rather than weakening them (Watts, 2004). The lesson for Rwenzori is not that the cases are identical, but that security action can acquire political meaning far beyond its immediate operational objective when communities already carry a history of exclusion.

The Casamance conflict in Senegal offers a related insight. Clark (1998) shows that military pressure did not by itself remove the identity and autonomy claims sustaining separatist mobilization. Rwenzori presents a comparable problem at the level of conflict dynamics: force may interrupt violence, but it cannot by itself settle disputes over recognition, legitimacy, belonging, or the political meaning of cultural institutions.

Symbolic authority and cultural space

The fourth finding concerns the unusually high political value of symbols. Access by a cultural leader to a particular district, the planting of a flag, the performance of a ritual, the recognition of a chief or king, or the location of a cultural institution can appear minor when compared with conventional questions of state power. In Rwenzori, however, these acts have repeatedly carried meanings about ownership, legitimacy, jurisdiction, and belonging. The Rwenzori conflict-mapping report documents how disputes surrounding cultural ceremonies and symbolic claims could quickly become politically charged because they touched older questions of

recognition and territorial authority (Mapping, 2020).

These symbols matter because they compress history into visible acts. A flag is not only a piece of cloth when one community sees it as recognition and another sees it as a territorial claim. A royal visit is not only ceremonial when it is interpreted as an assertion of authority across an ethnically mixed district. Cultural space therefore becomes a political language through which communities communicate security, status, and historical ownership. Where boundaries of cultural belonging overlap with administrative boundaries, even small symbolic disputes can acquire disproportionate significance.

The creation or recognition of multiple cultural institutions in the region has consequently produced both inclusion and competition. Recognition can decentralize cultural authority and reduce the sense that one group speaks for everyone. At the same time, if the limits of symbolic jurisdiction are unclear, parallel institutions can become rival claims to the same social space. The literature on chieftaincy disputes and ethnic politics elsewhere in Africa shows similar dynamics, including Nigeria's Middle Belt, where disputes over traditional authority often intersect with indigeneity and political access (Suberu, 2001). The Rwenzori case demonstrates that peacebuilding must take ceremonial and cultural questions seriously rather than dismissing them as secondary to "real" politics.

Unresolved historical losses

The fifth finding is that unresolved losses continue to shape present political interpretation. Reuss and Titeca (2016) show that violence in western Uganda cannot be separated from accumulated narratives of marginalization, cultural struggle, and political exclusion. Accounts of violent suppression, killings, forced displacement, cultural humiliation, and exclusion have been carried forward through family memory, community narratives, commemorative practices, and political storytelling. Not every

historical account is uncontested, and different communities may remember the same period differently. What matters analytically is that these memories remain socially active and influence how later state actions are interpreted.

This helps explain why institutional reforms have sometimes produced less reconciliation than expected. District creation can improve access to local government. Recognition of a kingdom can acknowledge identity. Development programs can improve material conditions. Yet none of these interventions necessarily creates a shared account of past violence or acknowledges the suffering that communities believe they endured. Where there has been no credible process of truth-telling, acknowledgment, or restorative engagement, historical losses remain politically available. They can be invoked by elites, activated during elections, attached to land disputes, or used to interpret new security operations.

The violence that unfolded between 2014 and 2016 should therefore not be understood as a spontaneous eruption from an otherwise settled environment. Madinah (2018) places the Kasese violence within a longer history of political tension, contested cultural authority, and state-community confrontation. This does not mean that history mechanically caused every clash. Rather, history supplied a repertoire of meanings through which new disputes were interpreted. In a protracted conflict, the past does not simply precede the present; it becomes one of the resources through which the present is politically organized.

Discussion

Conflict system

Taken together, the findings support the article's central claim that violence in the Rwenzori sub-region is best understood as a historically reproduced conflict system. This framing does not imply that the Bayola uprising, Rwenzururu rebellion, ADF insurgency, intercommunal clashes, and the 2016 palace attack were the same conflict.

Their actors, agendas, and contexts differed substantially. What connects them is the political environment in which they emerged: a borderland marked by contested authority, uneven recognition, difficult state-society relations, and recurring opportunities for historical grievance to be reinterpreted through new political struggles.

This distinction matters because a simplistic continuity argument would be as misleading as an event-centered one. History does not determine violence in a straight line. Institutions change, leaders change, and communities adapt. The more persuasive interpretation is that earlier political arrangements created durable structures and narratives that constrained later choices. Colonial incorporation under Toro authority contributed to an enduring politics of recognition. Postcolonial centralization reproduced suspicions about external rule. Later cultural recognition addressed important grievances but also created new questions about jurisdiction in a diverse region. Security operations then interacted with those memories, sometimes reinforcing the very narratives of exclusion that the state sought to contain.

Unmet needs and weak legitimacy

Azar's (1990) framework is especially powerful in explaining why formal institutional changes did not automatically produce durable peace. The Rwenzori case demonstrates that basic communal needs are relational. Political participation, identity recognition, and security cannot be understood only by counting offices, districts, or cultural institutions. Communities also ask whether those institutions are legitimate, whether they feel represented, and whether recognition is meaningful in practice. A group may formally possess a cultural institution and still experience insecurity if it believes the state can arbitrarily restrict that institution or if neighboring groups interpret its presence as domination.

PSC theory also clarifies why security-centered responses have limits. Militarization may alter the

balance of force, but it cannot by itself produce trust. Trust depends on expectations about future behavior. If communities believe that the state will respond to political claims primarily through coercion, they may become less willing to use formal institutions. Conversely, if the state views cultural mobilization as a potential security threat, officials may interpret even nonviolent symbolic acts suspiciously. The result can be a self-reinforcing cycle in which each side's protective action confirms the other side's fears. Communities mobilize because they fear exclusion; the state securitizes mobilization because it fears disorder; securitization then becomes evidence of exclusion.

The Rwenzori experience therefore extends PSC theory by highlighting the role of symbolic institutions. Azar emphasized identity and recognition, but the case shows how those needs become embodied in concrete sites, titles, flags, ceremonies, and territorial practices. These are not merely representations of conflict; they can become mechanisms through which conflict escalates or de-escalates. Negotiated rules around symbolic authority may therefore be as important as conventional power-sharing arrangements in ethnically diverse settings.

Historical grievance reproduced through memory

One of the most important implications of the findings is that intergenerational grievance should not be understood as passive inheritance. Communities do not simply receive an unchanged package of historical anger from their ancestors. Historical memory is continually interpreted in light of present events. Some memories fade, others are revived, and still others acquire new meaning. A contemporary confrontation can make an older story suddenly relevant; an older story can make a contemporary confrontation appear to be part of a long pattern.

This process helps explain why conflict narratives can remain durable even when material and administrative conditions improve. The establishment of new districts or the recognition of

a kingdom may be objectively significant, but communities may judge these measures against accumulated historical expectations. If reform is experienced as incomplete, conditional, or later contradicted by coercive action, earlier grievances can regain force. The political challenge is therefore not only to deliver institutional change but to create credible evidence that the relationship itself has changed.

Comparative evidence from Kenya shows how historical dispossession can remain politically active long after the original institutional arrangement has changed. Kanyinga (2009) demonstrates that unresolved land grievances in Kenya continued to shape political mobilization and ethnic tension well into the postcolonial period. The relevance to Rwenzori lies less in the specific issue of land than in the broader mechanism: historical injury can survive legal and administrative reform when affected communities believe that the underlying injustice has never been adequately acknowledged or repaired.

A similar lesson emerges from Sudan, where regional marginalization became intertwined with identity and long-running distrust of centralized political authority. Deng (2011) shows how those accumulated grievances were reproduced across successive political orders rather than disappearing with changes in government. The comparison helps clarify why changing administrative structures in Rwenzori, while important, has not automatically dissolved older narratives of exclusion.

South Africa offers another useful reminder that formal political transformation does not necessarily eliminate the social geography of past injustice. Christopher (2011) notes the persistence of spatial inequalities after apartheid, illustrating how historical arrangements can continue to influence present experience even after the legal order has changed. In Rwenzori, the comparable analytical point is that institutional reform and historical healing are related but not identical processes.

Pluralistic recognition rather than winner-takes-all

The study also reveals a limitation in approaches that treat cultural recognition as a one directional remedy. In a diverse region, recognition must be relational and plural. The state cannot assume that acknowledging one cultural institution automatically resolves the wider identity question. Recognition changes the balance of symbolic power. It can affect how neighboring communities understand territory, local government, land, customary authority, and political representation.

This is particularly relevant in Bundibugyo and Ntoroko, where cultural identities and territorial claims overlap. Sustainable accommodation requires clearer boundaries between cultural dignity and political jurisdiction. Cultural institutions can be respected without allowing symbolic authority to become a proxy for exclusive territorial ownership. Equally, administrative institutions should not use the existence of multiple cultural groups as a reason to deny any of them meaningful recognition. The challenge is to construct a framework in which communities can be culturally secure without requiring the cultural insecurity of their neighbors.

Such a framework requires routine negotiation, not only emergency dialogue after violence. Local governments, cultural leaders, civil society, youth representatives, women's groups, security actors, and religious leaders need institutional spaces in which disputes over ceremonies, mobility, representation, and symbolic practices can be addressed before they become tests of political strength. This is where peacebuilding moves from crisis response to conflict transformation.

Implications for peacebuilding

The policy implications of this analysis are straightforward in principle but demanding in practice. First, peacebuilding in Rwenzori needs a historical justice component. This does not require imposing one official history on communities whose memories differ. It requires creating credible processes in which experiences of violence,

displacement, exclusion, and loss can be acknowledged. Truth-telling, local documentation, memorialization, and restorative dialogue can reduce the political need to keep proving that suffering occurred. Without acknowledgment, every new confrontation risks becoming another layer in an expanding archive of grievance.

Second, political inclusion must be evaluated substantively rather than formally. The existence of districts, elected councils, or recognized cultural leaders does not by itself demonstrate that communities experience governance as inclusive. Representation should be assessed through access to decision-making, fairness in public administration, responsiveness to local concerns, and the ability of minority groups within each district to participate without fear of domination. This is particularly important because a community that is a regional majority may still contain local minorities whose insecurities deserve protection.

Third, the state needs a more conflict-sensitive security doctrine for politically and culturally sensitive areas. This does not imply abandoning law enforcement or tolerating armed violence. It means recognizing that the manner in which security is exercised can either strengthen or weaken long-term legitimacy. Clear rules of engagement, accountability for abuses, community liaison mechanisms, transparent investigations, and communication with local leaders are not public-relations additions to security.

Fourth, socioeconomic interventions should be designed to reduce the practical conditions through which identity grievances become attractive to young people. Education, employment, infrastructure, health services, and enterprise support cannot substitute for political recognition, but neither can recognition substitute for livelihoods.

Finally, peacebuilding should include continuous grievance monitoring. The region's conflict history shows that periods of relative calm can conceal

unresolved tensions. Local peace committees, universities, cultural institutions, civil society organizations, and district authorities can jointly track emerging disputes over land, cultural events, administrative boundaries, political rhetoric, and security incidents.

Conclusion

The history of conflict in Uganda's Rwenzori sub-region demonstrates why durable peace cannot be built by treating each violent episode as an isolated breakdown of order. The region's recurrent tensions have been shaped by a much longer political story involving contested authority, colonial incorporation, struggles for cultural recognition, postcolonial centralization, insurgency, local identity competition, and repeated coercive encounters with the state. These histories do not mechanically determine present violence, but they have created institutions, memories, and political expectations through which contemporary events are understood.

Sustainable peace therefore requires a shift from managing episodes to transforming relationships. That shift should combine historically informed reconciliation, plural cultural recognition, substantive political inclusion, equitable development, and security practices that protect both public order and community trust. The task is not to erase the region's competing histories. It is to build institutions strong enough to allow those histories to coexist without repeatedly becoming grounds for violence. In that sense, the future of peace in Rwenzori depends less on demonstrating state power than on making the state, local institutions, and cultural authorities, credible partners in a shared political order.

Recommendations

Institutionalize historically grounded reconciliation; Government, cultural institutions, civil society, and local communities should support structured truth-telling and restorative dialogue around major episodes of violence, displacement, and cultural

suppression. Such processes should permit multiple community narratives rather than imposing a single official account.

Create a permanent inter-cultural dialogue mechanism for the Rwenzori region; A standing forum involving Bakonzo, Bamba, Basongora, and other communities should address disputes over ceremonies, cultural mobility, symbols, and overlapping claims before they escalate into security crises.

Adopt conflict-sensitive security practice; Security operations should be guided by proportionality, accountability, human-rights standards, transparent investigation of disputed incidents, and stronger community liaison. These safeguards are essential to prevent security action from becoming a new source of collective grievance.

Link recognition with equitable socioeconomic opportunity; Targeted investment in education, youth employment, health, infrastructure, and enterprise development should complement political and cultural measures. Material deprivation and identity exclusion should be addressed together rather than as competing policy priorities.

Develop a locally anchored conflict early-warning system; Universities, district authorities, cultural leaders, religious institutions, and civil-society organizations should monitor emerging tensions and interpret them against known historical fault lines. This would allow intervention before symbolic disputes harden into ethnopolitical confrontation

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial, professional, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest related to this manuscript.

Funding Statement

The authors received article-preparation support from Valley University of Science and Technology in accordance with the University's policy on institutional research support. The University had

no role in the analysis, interpretation, or conclusions of the article.

References

- 1) Adebani, W. (2018). Historical marginalization and protracted conflict in the Niger Delta: A protracted social conflict perspective. *African Studies Review*, 61(3), 45-67. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.21>
- 2) Azar, E. E. (1990). *The management of protracted social conflicts: Theory and cases*. Dartmouth Publishing.
- 3) Bayanda (2015). [Full bibliographic details were not provided in the original manuscript and should be verified before submission].
- 4) Boone, C. (2003). *Political topographies of the African state: Territorial authority and institutional choice*. Cambridge University Press.
- 5) Burton, J. (1997). *Conflict: Resolution and protracted social conflicts*. St. Martin's Press.
- 6) Christopher, A. J. (2011). Urban segregation in post-apartheid South Africa. *Urban Studies*, 48(16), 1-15.
- 7) Clark (1998). [Full bibliographic details were not provided in the original manuscript and should be verified before submission].
- 8) Deng, F. (2011). *Identity, diversity, and constitutionalism in Africa*. HSRC Press.
- 9) Gurr, T. R. (2000). *Peoples versus states: Minorities at risk in the new century*. United Nations University Press.
- 10) Harman, M. (2015). Historical grievances and electoral violence in Kenya's Rift Valley. *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 15(2), 65-89.
- 11) Herbst, J. (2000). *States and power in Africa: Comparative lessons in authority and control*. Princeton University Press.
- 12) Hintjens, H. (1999). Post-genocide Rwanda: Considering the role of ethnicity. *African Affairs*, 98(390), 66-97.
- 13) Human Rights Watch. (2017). *World Report 2017: Events of 2016*.

- 14) Kanyinga, K. (2009). The legacy of the White Highlands: Land rights, ethnicity, and the post-2007 election crisis in Kenya. *African Studies Review*, 52(2), 1-36.
- 15) Kathuria, R. (2017). Identity, marginalization, and ethnic conflict in Kenya: A protracted social conflict approach. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 12(1), 25-41.
- 16) Khisa, M., & Rwengabo, S. (2022). The deepening politics of fragmentation in Uganda: Understanding violence in the Rwenzori region. *African Studies Review*, 65(4), 939-964. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.80>
- 17) Lonsdale, J. (2004). Moral and symbolic dimensions of political identity in Africa. *African Studies Review*, 47(2), 1-22.
- 18) Madinah, N. (2018). The blood bath in Kasese District, Western Uganda. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(11), 74-94.
- 19) Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton University Press.
- 20) Mapping, A. C. (2020). *Rwenzori sub-region conflict mapping report*.
- 21) Nsibambi, F. (2018). Documenting and presenting contentious narratives and objects: Experiences from museums in Uganda. *Heritage*, 2(1), 27-33. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage2010002>
- 22) Reuss, A., & Titeca, K. (2016). Beyond ethnicity: Violence in Western Uganda and Rwenzori's 99 problems. *Review of African Political Economy*, 44(151), 131-141.
- 23) RFPJ. (2012). [Full bibliographic details were not provided in the original manuscript and should be verified before submission].
- 24) Sseremba, Y. (2020). Ethnicity and conflict escalation in Uganda. *Third World Quarterly*, 41(12), 2030-2047.
- 25) Suberu, R. (2001). *Federalism and ethnicity in Nigeria: The politics of structural accommodation*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
- 26) Syahuka-Muhindo, A., & Titeca, K. (2016). *The Rwenzururu movement and the struggle for the Rwenzururu Kingdom in Uganda (Discussion Paper)*. Institute of Development Policy, University of Antwerp.
- 27) Tshimba, D. N. (2020). Society against state or state against society? The unfolding of violence in contemporary Uganda's Rwenzori region. *African Security Review*, 26, 134-161.
- 28) Watts, M. (2004). Resource curse? Governmentality, oil and power in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. *Geopolitics*, 9(1), 50-80.