

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GJ-12

The Late Kabaka and
First President of Uganda

May 15, 1971
P.O. Box 21262
Nairobi, Kenya

Dear Mr. Nolte:

On the 25th of January 1971, Idi Amin, a General in the Ugandan Army, seized control of the government from President Milton Obote. One month later, the General, issuing one of his first official orders, declared March 29 to April 4, 1971 national holidays--he was planning to bring home the body of the late Kabaka and first President of Uganda, Sir Edward Frederick Walugembe Mutebi Mutesa II, K.B.E. The former king died in exile November 22, 1969 in a flat in the outskirts of London. The death of Sir Edward, or King Freddie as he was referred to by many of his associates, ended an unbroken line of 36 Bugandan kings. Buganda was the largest of the previous four kingdoms of Uganda.

Please bring this Card with you



THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA

*The Government of the Republic of
Uganda*

invites

.....
*to the Funeral Service for the late Sir Edward Frederick
Mutesa, First President of Uganda and former
Kabaka of Buganda, at Namirembe Cathedral
on Sunday, 4th April, 1971*

R.S.V.P.:

President's Office,
P.O. Box 7168, Kampala.
Telephone: Kampala 54881.

Time: 10 a.m.

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While participating in the funeral ceremonies, I took the opportunity of finding out more about Sir Edward and the history of the Buganda Kabakas. I found it difficult to get people to talk about the late Kabaka. The majority of the people were in a deep state of mourning and would reflect only that the king had finally returned as he had said he would. (They referred to the autobiography of Sir Edward which he ended by saying: "In the end I shall return to the land of my fathers and to my people.")

Many people in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, waited with mixed emotions as preparations to bring the Kabaka home commenced. There was some confusion regarding whether the Kabaka was really dead. Rumors spread that he was alive and once again returning to assume his responsibilities as Kabaka. Opportunists took advantage of these reports by collecting money to defray the costs of the Kabaka's travel and maintenance upon his return. The government made several attempts to subdue these rumours, for the most part unsuccessfully. As the time neared the rumors became more widespread.

On March 31st, the day the Kabaka arrived, people gathered at the airport, sang songs and performed traditional dances commemorating the accomplishments of the long line of kings. Many people had arrived the previous day. A certain amount of gaiety existed among the thousands present. When the plane finally landed, however, and the flag-draped casket bearing the Kabaka's body came into full view, the gaiety ceased. As abruptly as the singing and dancing ceased, wailing from the group began. People at least fifteen miles away from the airport claimed to hear the piercing cries of the spectators. The truth would now be heard, King Freddie was really dead.

As I explored the history of Uganda I found that Sir Edward was not the first Bugandan Kabaka to be expelled from the territory and then return upon death. Sir Edward's grandfather, Kabaka Mwanga II, fled to the Seychelles in 1897. His expulsion was the result of his resentment of foreign powers coming in and distributing territory which he felt rightfully belonged to the Buganda. He ruled the Bugandan kingdom from 1884 to 1897.

It was during the era of Mwanga that the British gained control over Buganda and subsequently declared a protectorate. The British, slowly adding territories of Bunyoro, Toro, Ankole, and Busoga, were soon to establish what is now called Uganda. Mwanga has been heralded as one of the most unpredictable of the Kabakas. His grandson, Sir Edward, had the following to say about Mwanga: "His failure to find a role that was acceptable to himself and his time was similar to the modern

uncertainties in Africa which are said to be caused by so much change in so short a time. Such a crisis of identity is unknown in Buganda and in a way I think the strains of adaptation were piled on to this one man. They were too great and destroyed him." Ironically while reading this passage I misread the reference clause and subsequently thought the author was projecting his own plight. I may still be right. Many writers have indicated that Sir Edward too was a victim of the times. As a member of the royalty he performed with much grace and dignity. As President of Uganda, however, he lacked political discipline. The Kabaka himself on several stages of his career let it be known that he was indeed more interested in his social activities than his political responsibilities.

English tradition dominated most of the late Kabaka's education. At age thirteen he attended King's College at Budo (approximately twelve miles from Kampala). King's College, built in 1906, was highly selective in its population. It enrolled mainly earmarked leaders and sons of chiefs. The school was staffed largely by Englishmen. According to an account by Sir Edward, English history was taught rather than African history. I am also told that the English tutors taught and prompted all the social mannerisms characteristic of a young English gentleman. At age fifteen when his father died and he succeeded to the throne, Sir Edward's tutoring program became more concentrated. After a very pompous coronation which legitimized his position as the new king of Buganda, Sir Edward transferred to Makerere University in Kampala and later to Cambridge University in England. While at Cambridge the Kabaka had the distinction of becoming the first African to be accepted into the Grenadier Guards. Within a short period of time King George VI, impressed with his performance as a Grenadier, promoted him to the rank of captain.

It was most difficult for the Kabaka to focus on his duties as King and at the same time concentrate on his school activities. Throughout his life the Kabaka, according to intimate informants, found it difficult to fill simultaneous roles, i.e., husband, father, king, and finally, president. It is quite evident that the style and geographic location of Sir Edward's educational career alienated him from the people of Uganda. Many felt he would have been better suited to sit on the throne in England rather than in his mother country. In spite of this fact, however, the Bugandans never stopped worshipping or accepting his position as king.

After leaving Cambridge in 1948 to assume the position as a full-time Kabaka, Sir Edward spent five years without having to face a political crisis. In 1953, however, he

began clashing with the Governor General of Buganda, Sir Edward Cohen. The British Government had sent Sir Edward Cohen to administer this undeveloped territory. The clash with the Governor General reached its climax as a result of three issues: a proposal to create a federation composed of Uganda, Tanganyika and Kenya; the transfer of the administration of Uganda from the Foreign Office of England to a local colonial office; and finally, the refusal of the British Government to designate a definite date for independence. Despite the conflict between the Kabaka and the Governor General, they both had great admiration for each other on a personal basis. The Governor General was also very popular amongst the Bugandan people. When the Kabaka and the Governor General reached a point of stalemate, however, the Governor summoned the British Government to have the Kabaka removed from Buganda as an obstruction to progress in the territory. Shortly thereafter, Her Majesty's Government sent a letter withdrawing recognition of Sir Edward Mutesa II as Native Ruler of the Province of Buganda. The Kabaka was summoned to the state house when he heard the accusations. He was immediately put under arrest and flown to England where he remained at the cost of the British Government for approximately two years. At the end of two years and many months of negotiating, the British Government restored the Kabaka to his former position. He returned home in October 1955 to a tumultuous welcome-home celebration. One paper reported that the Muslims, in their joy at seeing the Kabaka again, put him on a balanced scale and after equalling his weight with shillings gave him this sum as their welcome-home gift.

Seven years after the Kabaka's return, Uganda received its independence and elected the Kabaka as its first President. The Kabaka recognized the potential danger in serving as President as well as Kabaka but after much deliberation with the elders decided he could handle both positions with discretion. The dual role proved to be too difficult for Sir Edward. The difficulties resulted in his once again being exiled from his country--this time by military force. The armed forces under orders from the President's Prime Minister Dr. Milton Obote, attacked the Kabaka's palace and sent the Kabaka fleeing to Burundi and eventually to England. Dr. Obote contended that Sir Edward as Kabaka had given Buganda precedence over the rest of Uganda. Obote felt Sir Edward to be a detriment to the growth of the whole of Uganda. Sir Edward lived in London 3½ years before he died. He was without financial support during these years and as a result his life-style was meagre and low-keyed, especially compared

to his first exile. Friends and compatriots such as the Grenadiers donated housing and other necessities when possible. It may be that this sharp change from king to pauper added to his early death at the age of 45.

Upon hearing of the death of Sir Edward, President Obote gave permission to the family to bring the body home, but with the stipulation that he could not be buried in the traditional manner of the Kabakas. The family declined his offer. After the January coup, however, General Idi Amin approached them with a new proposition and the family decided to bring Sir Edward home.

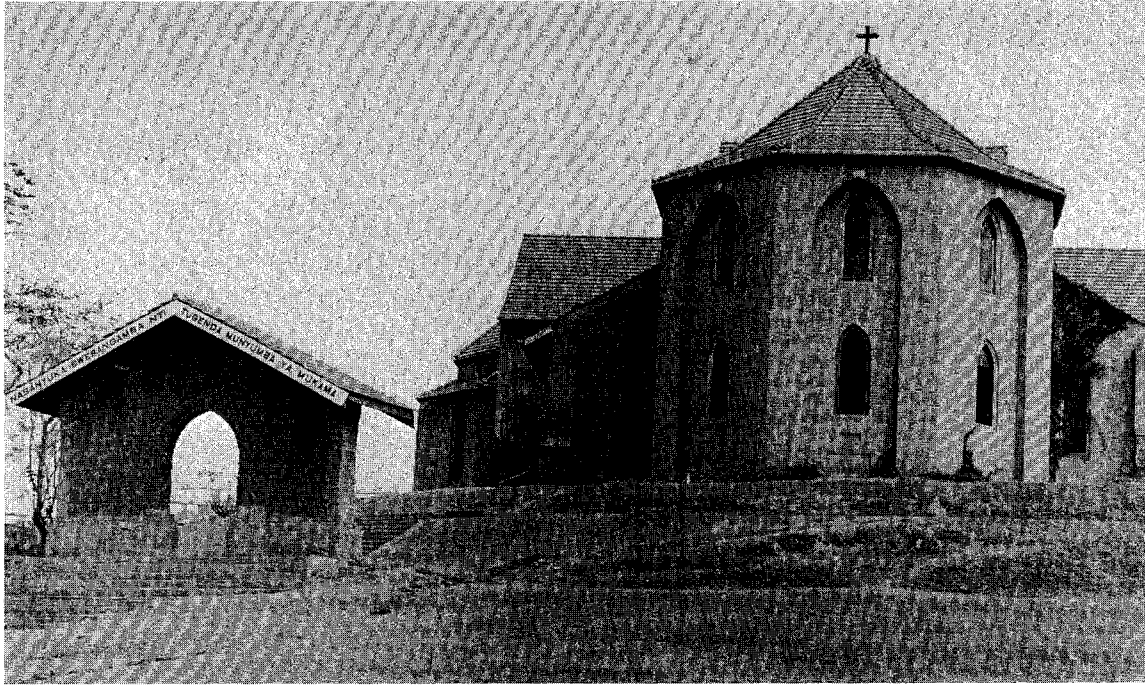
The opening ceremony at the airport on March 31st marked the beginning of a state function unequalled in pomp and splendor by any event to date in Uganda. People from all areas of the world gathered in Kampala to witness this historical occasion. Lorries filled with people from the rural areas of Uganda formed a steady stream along the many highways leading to Kampala. After a 73-gun salute, the family of the Kabaka and the Minister of Foreign Affairs who had accompanied the family to London presented the body to General Amin. The General gave a brief speech and then accompanied the body by helicopter from the Entebbe Airport to the Kololo airstrip in Kampala. Kololo is the historical spot where Uganda received her independence in 1962. A squad of Grenadiers who had accompanied the body from London also flew into the Kololo airstrip. Thousands of mourners participated in the short but poignant service at the airstrip. In a very emotional speech, General Amin asked the people of Uganda to remember two things: first, "...the President was an elected President. If he was a bad President the blame for this falls partly on those who elected him; secondly, all men are both good and bad and Presidents are also men. We must not, therefore, treat a man as all bad because he had made mistakes. The late Sir Edward may have made some mistakes but he also did many good things and we must remember him for those and respect him as the first President, as a man of dignity who did no shame to his high office."

At this point in the ceremony, the army honor guard escorted the body of Sir Edward to the Parliament building--again, there was a short ceremony. After the rites at Parliament the entourage again escorted the body, this time to the St. Paul's Cathedral, Namirembe. At Namirembe, the body lay in state for the next four days. Prior to the arrival of the body people had queued for over one mile to be in line to see it.

I did not attempt to see Sir Edward the first day, as I was assured by friends that the second day would be a better time. They were mistaken. The second day I had allotted two hours to wait in line to see the Kabaka. Starting at the Cathedral we drove almost three miles in pursuit of the end of a double line of people before we halted. It was then one o'clock in the afternoon. While pausing, I asked one chap wearing the traditional bark cloth how long he had been in line. He answered that he had arrived at 8:00 a.m. and had covered quite a distance. I didn't have the heart to tell him he was still three miles from the Cathedral. I was sure, however, that it would not have made any difference to this man, as everyone who joined the procession appeared to have resolved that they would see the Kabaka for the last time at all costs. Rather than be stoic and wait in the now five-mile line, I accepted a diplomatic pass which allowed me to see the body immediately rather than having to wait ten to twelve hours.

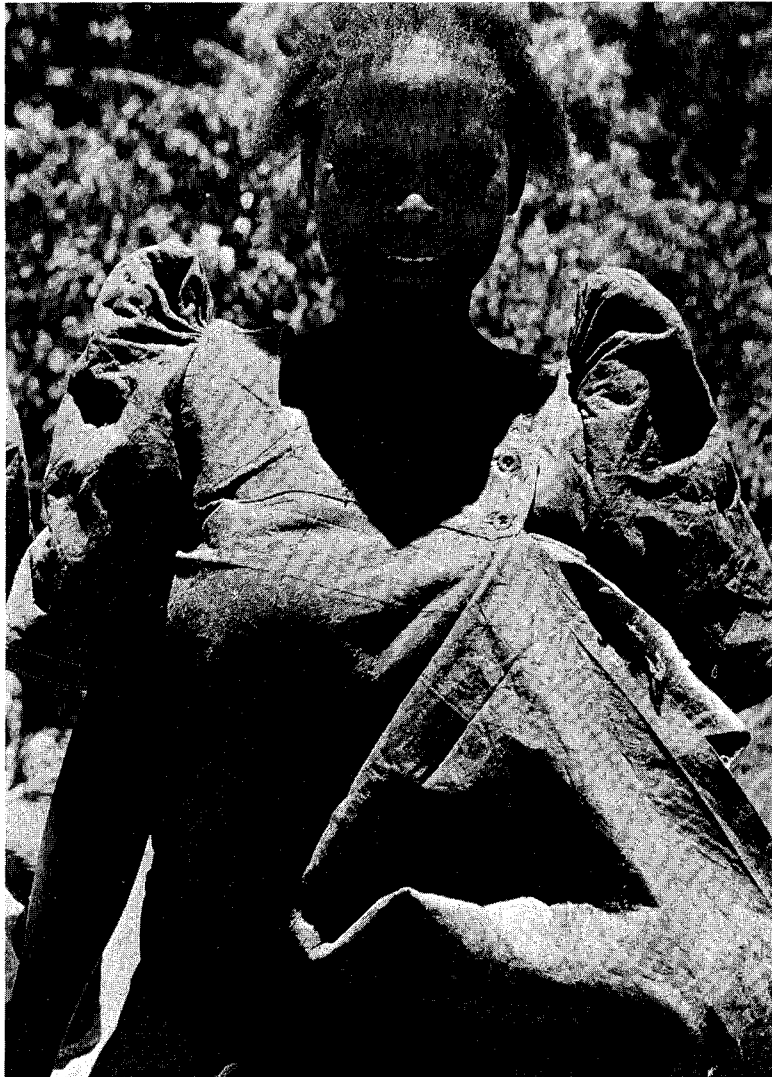


Delegation from the Keyan Government (Photo: Daily Nation Newspaper)



ABOVE

Namirimbe
Cathedral



LEFT

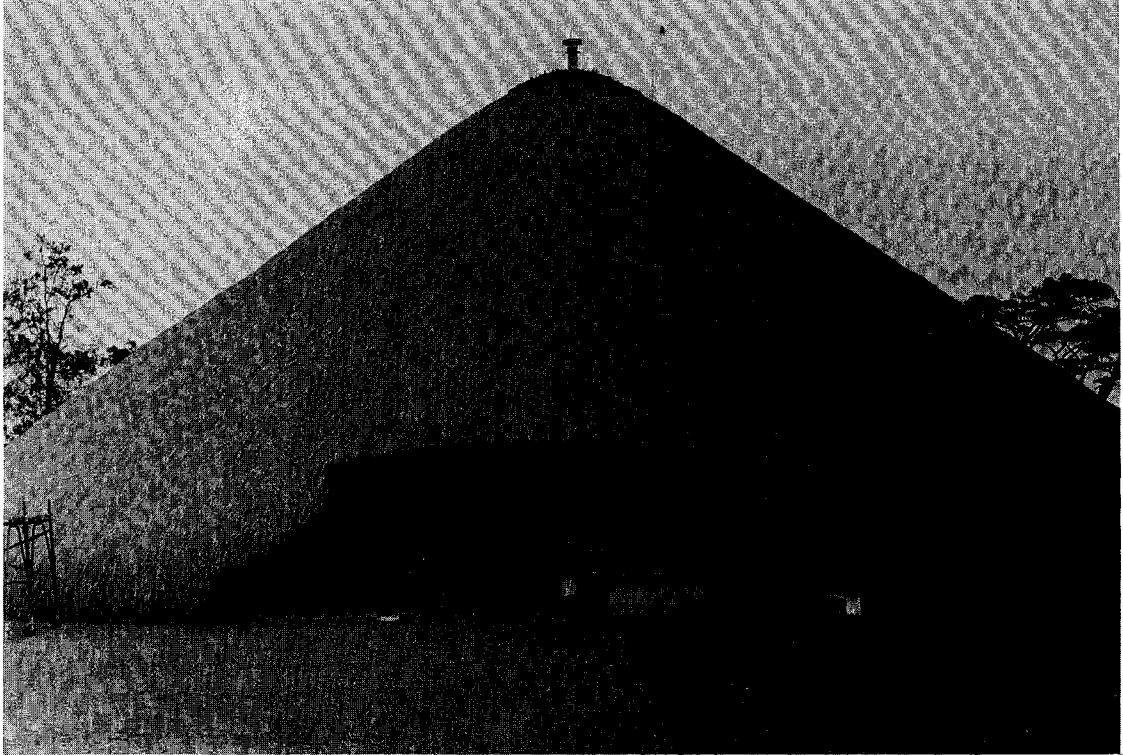
The trad-
itional dress
in bark
cloth

Sir Edward, dressed in a full general's uniform, looked amazingly well after being dead for almost 1½ years. As we filed through the chapel we could hear sporadic wailings and during several intervals people had to be physically carried from the body. Many of his more ardent followers threw themselves at the foot of the casket and assumed an almost catatonic state. On Sunday, April 4th, friends of the Kabaka's family invited me to ride with them in the final procession from Namirembe to the Kusubi Tombs, the final stop for Sir Edward. As far as the eye could see, people lined the roads. Many mourners wore black but the majority wore the traditional bark cloth. Continuous wailing by the throngs of people during the five-mile trip to the Tombs ended at the Tombs as the sounds and rhythms of the traditional drums took over. The traditional drums are used only at functions relating to the Kabaka. The sight of men, women and children crying, wailing and throwing themselves on the ground will remain vivid in my mind for many years.

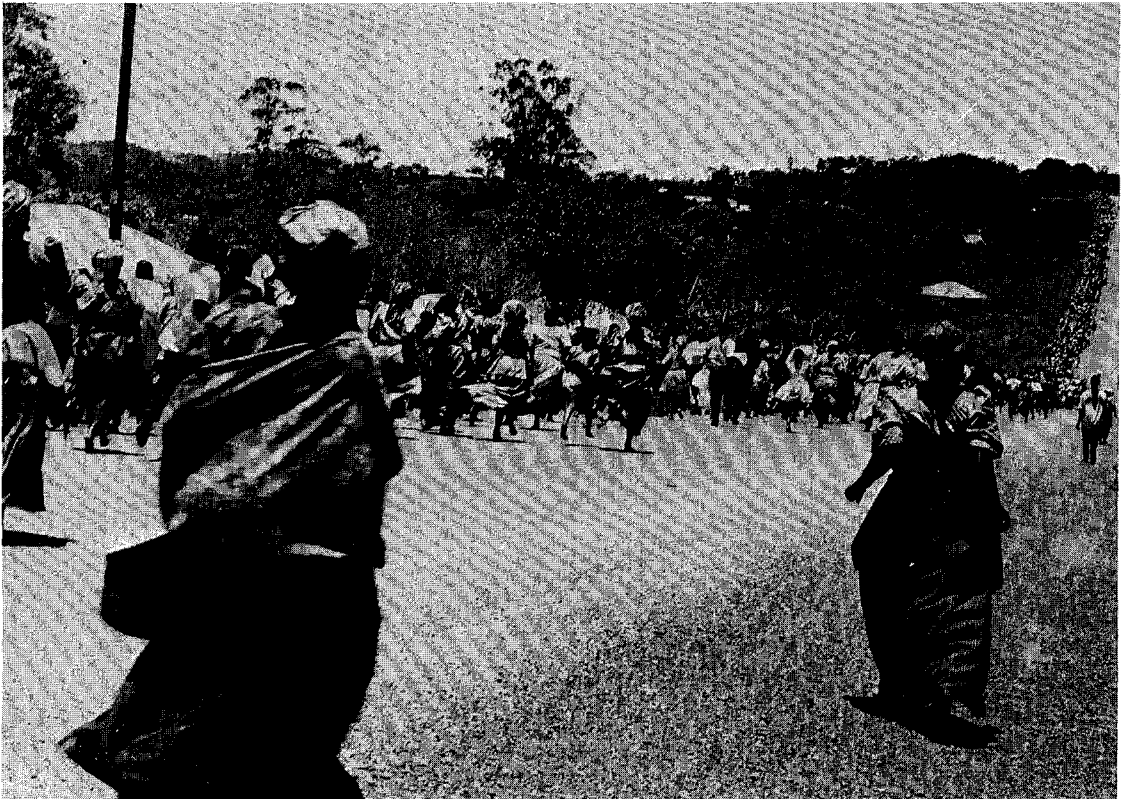
The day following the burial service a few elders whom I had met gave me a short history of the Kusubi Tombs. Prior to Mutesa I, who ruled from 1860 to 1884, each Kabaka who died had to be buried in two separate locations. One site held the jaw-bone of the Kabaka, while in the other site the elders placed the remainder of the body. Mutesa I, having become a Muslim, decided to do away with this custom. Subsequently Mutesa became the first Kabaka to be buried whole. In 1882 he built himself a palace on the present Kusubi site which he requested to be his burial plot upon death. Beginning with Mutesa I, each succeeding Kabaka was buried in the Kusubi Tombs. The tomb is a huge round edifice, made of wooden posts and woven reeds. It has a thatched roof which extends almost to the ground. Sir Edward's father, Daudi Chwa II, decided to make Kusubi Tombs a permanent burial place for Kabakas. He therefore had the tombs reconstructed with a permanent foundation and a steel frame over which he placed the customary thatch. It took two years to complete the Tombs.

During the actual service, I didn't get an opportunity to see the intricate details of Kusubi, so I returned the next day when the crowds had dispersed. The inside, approximately fifty feet in diameter, is decorated with shields, spears and staffs, along with pictures of their former owners. Around the inner perimeter of the great round house are curtains which separate the living quarters of the widows of the late Kabakas from the main hall. The widows of the Kabakas have the responsibility of keeping the Tombs clean and maintaining a general upkeep.

One of the elders gave me permission to take a picture inside the Tombs--a rarity--but because of haste and the excitement of the moment, I forgot to change the aperture on my camera and subsequently got three blanks upon development.



KUSUBI TOMB

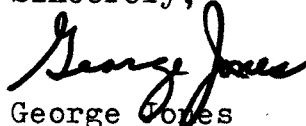


The queue four miles away.

With the exception of one adult who died from heat exhaustion and one nine year old who was crushed in a scramble to close a gap in the procession, the ceremony went very smoothly. The million people were most orderly and cooperative. Rumors which almost persuaded me not to attend gave the impression that there would be a series of tribal massacres and riots. The four days were without incident.

The burial of Sir Edward Mutesa II will be remembered for many years, not only because he played such an important role in the lives of so many people but also because he represents the last of the kings of the Buganda. Although in 1966 President Obote declared Uganda a Republic and eliminated all the kingdoms, there remained much hope that a new ruler might someday restore them. Many thought this time had arrived with the take-over of the new regime. No such luck. President Amin, during a very timely moment in the four-day ceremony, stated that the return of the Kabaka denoted a gesture of respect and honor to Sir Edward Mutesa II. This gesture should in no way be construed as a sanction for restoration of the kingdoms. He further stated that the laying of the bark cloth by the son (which usually symbolizes the crowning of a new king) should be considered a ceremonial gesture and nothing else--Uganda would remain a Republic.

Sincerely,



George Obote

Received in New York on May 27, 1971.