

The Restoration of Kanazi Palace in NW Tanzania: First Steps Towards a Sustainable Heritage Tourism

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I put a new twist to colonial studies during the spring and summer of 2011 while engaged in the restoration of an early 20th century palace in western Tanzania—with the goal to make it an integral part of sustainable heritage tourism in Kagera Region. Built by the Germans in 1905, the Kanazi Palace is distinctive for its grand style, its rural setting, and its blend of German colonial architecture with local architectural style.

German designs were more than architectural, as the King or Mukama of Kihanja kingdom was the most powerful yet the most distant ruler from the German seat of power in Bukoba on Lake Victoria. Located on a high plateau some 70 km away, Kahigi II was enticed to relocate his capital at Kanazi, approximately 20 km south of Bukoba. In return, the Germans built him a palace, made him a major in the German army, and allocated him lands belonging to neighboring kingdoms.

When the Germans capitulated in 1916, Kahigi reacted strongly to a British officer's rebuke and when slapped in public, he retreated to his natal home, where he committed suicide while declaring that he could never serve the British. His kingdom then passed to three successors whose authority was abbreviated by the British until his grandson, Petro Nyarubamba, took the throne in 1958, only to be stripped of his power and governmental support by the new independence government. From that moment, the palace began a steady decline.

Lack of maintenance and funds to replace leaking roofs meant the collapse of most of the stately court building in the 1980s. By 2008



the main palace house was degrading rapidly as rain water poured onto massive mud brick walls. An appeal for assistance came from Kiroyera Tours, a local tour company that focuses on heritage tourism. Collaborating with Mary Kalikawe of Kiroyera, I persuaded the American Embassy to provide emergency stabilization funds to re-roof the court and main house in the summer of 2009. A later grant then made a larger restoration project possible. I returned on a leave of absence in early 2009 to complete the major parts of the restoration of three primary buildings within the palace grounds, reasoning that these were not just “colonial” buildings and icons of foreign domination. Rather these buildings were constructed by, modified by, and often rebuilt by local people with local sensibilities and needs. An important part of modern Tanzanian history unfolded within their walls, making them uniquely Tanzanian and capturing an era in which modernity was introduced and lives became forever different.

Using local craftsmen who identified strongly with Kihanja kingdom, both the prison on the north side and the original home of Kahigi II on the south side of the court required major restoration upon original foundations. The suite of four rooms where Kahigi

first lived had already been allocated for a new museum by King Nyarubamba (who unexpectedly died in December of 2010). Replacement of elegant elephant grass ceilings in the court proper, where the king sat on a raised platform for audiences, was another priority. Most interesting was the discovery of ritual paraphernalia in the back room of Kahigi's first residence—a finding consistent with his traditional religious duties.

A UF summer field school undertook limited archaeological inquiry during the last month of restoration. This led to some very important insights into industrial activity within the palace grounds, the possible location of a modern but traditionally inspired alternative residence for Kahigi II, and the location of the ritual house where he conferred with his advisors and diviners.

Kanazi Palace will act as a central focus for heritage tourism that appeals to a wide range of people—school children, local citizens, and international visitors—helping to sustain local jobs and the vitality of memory about a past that should not be forgotten.

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