Buganda's Mailo land: A gift mismanaged, not a curse

We were raised on a simple truth: *obuggagga buli mu ttaka*, (wealth lies in the land). It was not folklore; it was a civilisational instruction. Yet more than a century after the 1900 Agreement handed Buganda one of the most structured land systems in the region, we are forced to confront an uncomfortable paradox: how did a society so richly endowed with land fail to translate it into enduring wealth?

Pre-colonial Buganda understood land as a living system. The Kabaka held ultimate authority, but land was organised through chiefs and clans to sustain production, loyalty, and governance. It was not fragmented property; it was a coordinated resource.

The 1900 Agreement altered that reality. It formalised land into Mailo titles; surveyed, registered, and allocated to chiefs and notables, many rewarded for their service in war, administration, and expansion. In today's terms, Buganda received prime real estate with legal backing at the very dawn of modern capitalism.

It was a head start few societies enjoyed. For a time, Buganda surged ahead. It led in education; administration, and social organisation. Its central location amplified its influence. Even today, its imprint on Uganda's institutional life is unmistakable.

But while Buganda advanced intellectually and culturally, it faltered economically on the very asset that should have secured its future.

The explanation is often outsourced to colonial disruption, to the unitary State, to politics. These factors matter. But economics plays by different rules. It rewards discipline, organisation, and long-term thinking.

And here lies the harder truth. It is difficult, indeed painful, to walk through Kampala today and encounter descendants of the very chiefs and aristocratic families who were endowed with Mailo land, now living with little or nothing to their name. This is not merely a historical contradiction; it is a failure of stewardship across generations.

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Land

How does a family move from land ownership at scale to landlessness within two or three generations?

The answer is neither mysterious nor accidental. It is structural and behavioural.

Mailo land, once consolidated, was steadily fragmented. Inheritance became subdivision; subdivision became dispute; dispute often ended in distress sales. Land was divided among extended families until plots became too small to sustain meaningful enterprise. What remained was not wealth, but titles without strategy.

In that vacuum, others stepped in. Not always through force, but through patience, capital, and organisation. Land changed hands; legally, quietly, and often irreversibly.

We now speak of land grabbers. But this language can become a convenient refuge from a harder truth: where land is underutilised, fragmented, or sold piecemeal, acquisition is inevitable. Capital does not sleep.

Buganda's missed opportunity was not political dominance; it was economic consolidation. With its early access to titled land, central geography, and educational advantage, it could have built intergenerational wealth through estates, commercial agriculture, urban development, and family enterprises.

Instead, land became inheritance to be divided rather than capital to be grown. And yet, this is not a closed chapter.

Buganda remains one of the most organised and culturally cohesive societies in the region. Its institutions endure. Its people continue to lead in many sectors. The foundation has not disappeared it has been misapplied.

The question, then, is not whether Mailo land was a curse. It was not. It was a gift. The real question is whether Buganda is ready to reclaim its own wisdom to move from sentiment to strategy, from inheritance to enterprise.

Because if *obuggagga buli mu ttaka* is to mean anything in the 21st century, it must be proven—not repeated.

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