

## THE ISOLATION OF BUHWEJU COUNTY, ANKOLE

J.C. DOORNKAMP

Of all the counties in Ankole, Buhweju is the most isolated. This is true in both a physical and a human sense. Buhweju is situated in north-western Ankole (Fig.1) between the lowland around Mbarara to the south-east, and the Kazinga Channel within the Western Rift Valley, to the north-west. This article is not intended to be a regional or a systematic study of Buhweju, but rather is concerned with the application of landform study to road development problems within the area.

Buhweju has a physical isolation which, to a large extent is related to the marked scarp that follows its southern, eastern and much of its northern boundaries. This scarp also separates the people of highland Buhweju from the more densely populated areas in the surrounding, often lower, parts of Ankole, and thereby encourages a human isolation. This isolation is fundamentally related to difficulty of access. Quite apart from this physical separation, Buhweju lies at the extreme north-western corner of Ankole. All the major routeways skirt Buhweju, none passes through it. In a sense Buhweju does not lead anywhere, and unlike some of its neighbouring areas, it does not receive any stimulus for development as a result of passing trade. For example, no buses enter Buhweju. The Mbarara-Ibanda road to the east is well served with public transport, but no services enter Buhweju. This is a reflection of both lack of demand and of bad roads, both of which form essential aspects of Buhweju's isolation.

Reference to Fig.2 shows that the scarp which marks the northern limit of Buhweju also forms the eastern side of the Marangara mountain mass. On the western and south-western sides of Marangara this scarp curves into Buhweju around the head of the drainage leading north-westwards into the Western Rift Valley. To the south-east of this scarp the drainage passes southwards through Buhweju and into the lower land around and west of Mbarara. As it curves through the area (Fig.2) this scarp in fact separates High Buhweju, to the south-east, from Intermediate Buhweju, to the north-west.

High Buhweju is an area of great relative relief, where valley floors filled with papyrus swamps commonly lie at 600-1200 feet below the interfluves. These interfluves frequently have flat, or nearly flat, crests which bevel the structures and often carry a lateritic duricrust cover. Valley-side slopes are steep and attain angles of 40 degrees, while in places bedrock cliffs are exposed. The rivers, flowing southwards, pass alternately through relatively wide, open valleys and narrow gorges; this is particularly so in the case of the Kiruruma. The drainage of High Buhweju (Fig.2) makes its exit in the south through only two narrow water-gaps cut across the ridge surrounding High Buhweju. In the case of the Kandekye water-gap, a 200-ft. knick-point occupies this gap.

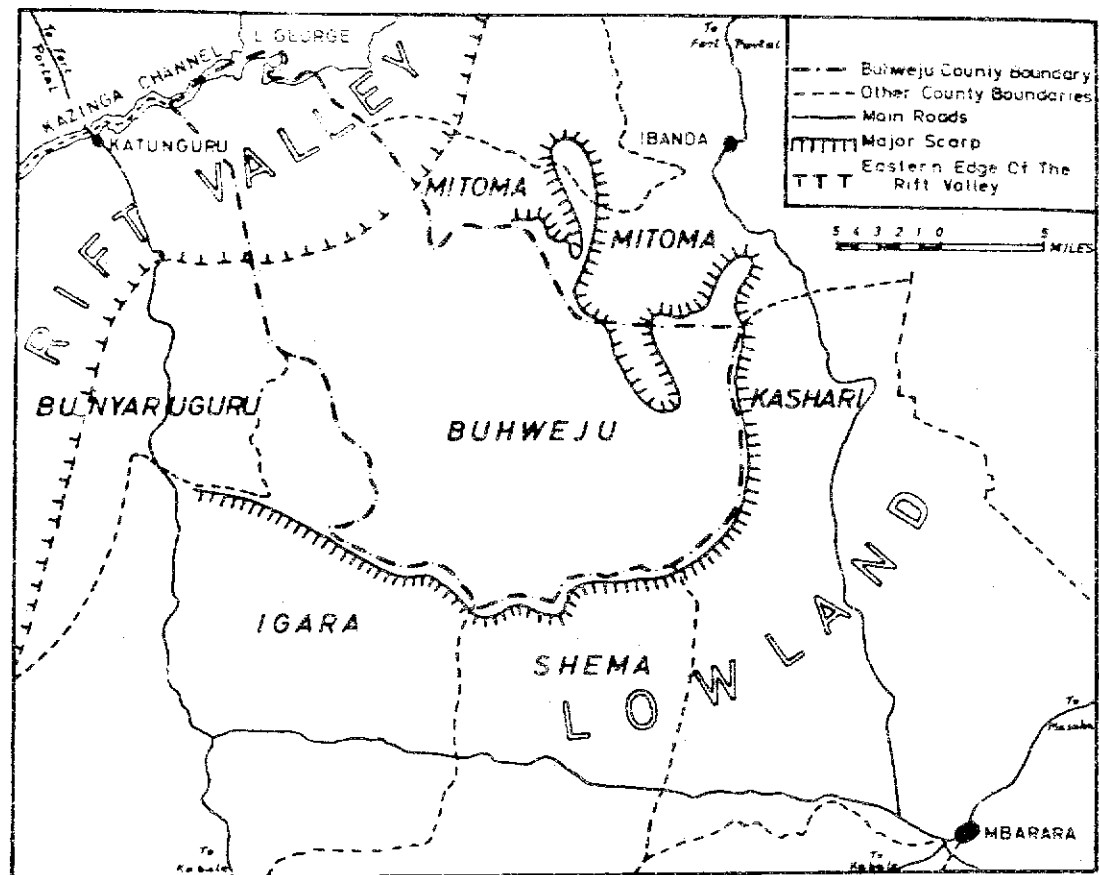


Fig.1. The situation of Buhweju.

Intermediate Buhweju lies to the north-east and below High Buhweju (fig.2) from which it is separated by the scarp around the head of the riftward drainage. This area is broken up by a dense, dendritic, drainage network into a large number of closely spaced hills with steep slopes and narrow valleys, the latter in many instances swamp-floored. Drainage lines carry knick-points often 200 feet or more in height.

Low Buhweju lies below Intermediate Buhweju and is separated from it by the Rift Valley wall. It extends from this scarp to the Kazinga Channel – Lake George shore. The dominant morphological characteristic of Low Buhweju is its flatness, although its small streams of low gradient have cut deeply into the sediments on the floor of the Rift Valley. Variety is provided only by the occasional lakes within the extinct Pleistocene and Recent volcanic craters.

Much of the human isolation of Buhweju may be related to difficulty of access, and to the difficulty of communication within Buhweju. Low Buhweju is a small and isolated part of the Rift Valley floor. The main road across the Rift Valley and Kazinga Channel at Katunguru and lies well to the south-west of Low Buhweju. Indeed the whole of Low Buhweju is served by only one road (which is defined on the 1:50,000 topographic sheet as a "motorable track") which is

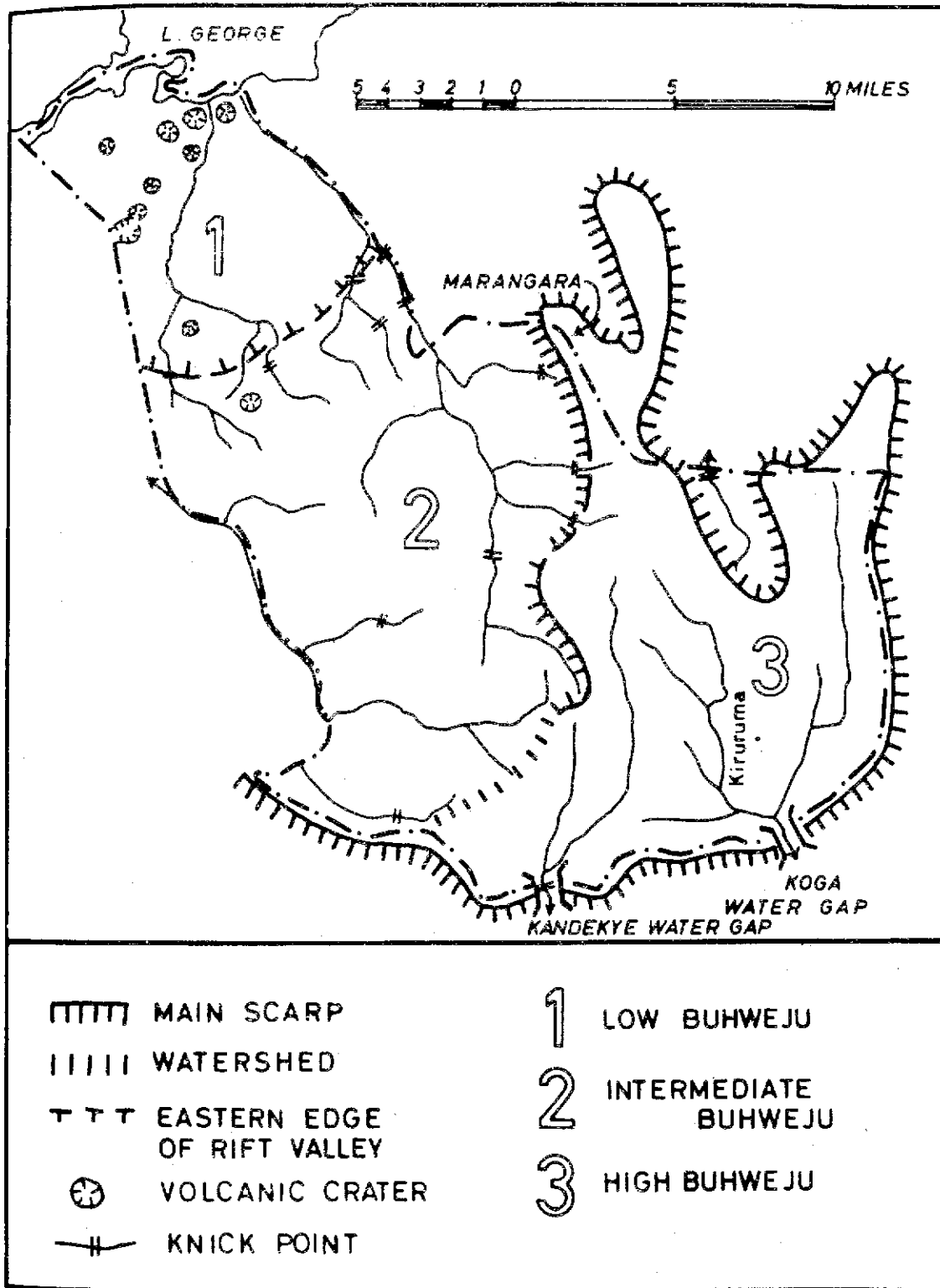


Fig.2. Physical features of Buhweju.

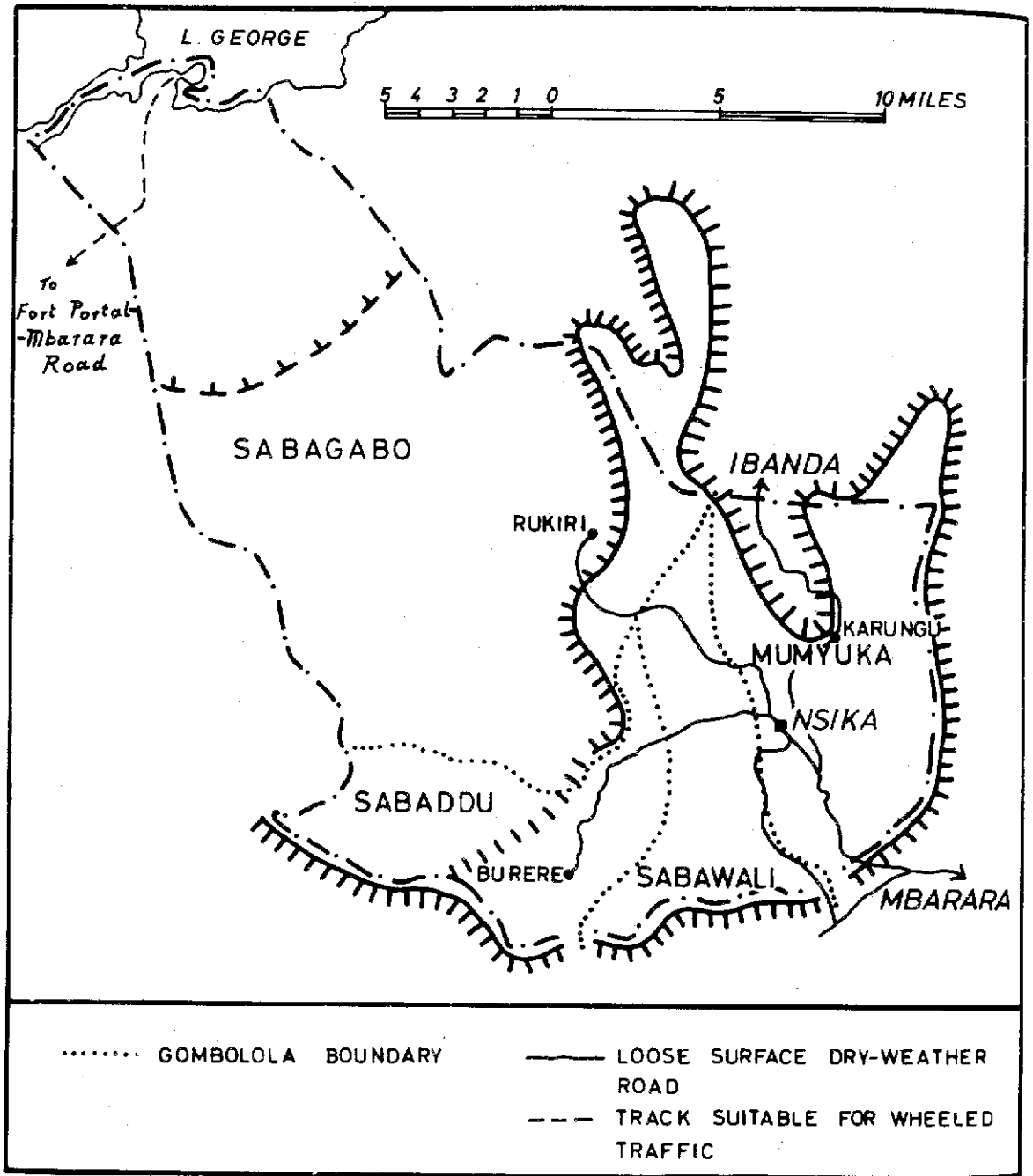


Fig.3. The roads of Buhweju.

connected to the main road (Fig.3). There is no road leading in from the north, and no transport connection with Intermediate Buhweju other than by infrequent footpaths. Undoubtedly the construction of a road leading from the main (Katunguru) road would be a relatively easy task, but the population is not sufficient to justify such a road. On the other hand the construction of a motorable road joining Low Buhweju to Intermediate Buhweju would be more difficult since this would involve the crossing of the Rift Valley wall. But, even were this done, Intermediate Buhweju would pose

its own problems of road engineering which are inherent in the difficulty of communication within Intermediate Buhweju. The construction of hill crest, or ridge crest, roads is difficult because the area has been dissected into a large number of closely-spaced hills; such roads would involve many undulations and steep gradients. Valley-floor routes would encounter other difficulties. During the rainy season in particular the narrow valley floors tend to be fully occupied by water, which would either submerge a road or wash it away. Secondly, a valley floor road would have to negotiate the knick-points which occur across the valleys. Frequently any one river will have three or four knick-points along its course. Valley side walls are steep, and mostly unbenched, and therefore could not easily be used for road construction without a great deal of expense. Lastly most of the area is covered by the Kasyoha Forest, which is thick enough to be termed impenetrable; its clearance for road construction would be very costly. The nature of Intermediate Buhweju is such, therefore, that no road now exists because of the physical difficulties described. It would not be true to say that a road could not be built, but to warrant the expense involved there would have to be an economic incentive.

One motorable road from High Buhweju does descend the steep scarp which separates it from Intermediate Buhweju, but its main function is to join the Gombolola headquarters at Rukiri to the Saza headquarters at Nsika.

Of the three physical units outlined above it is High Buhweju that is best served by motorable roads. The internal roads form the administrative arteries between Nsika and the Gombololas. The terrain of High Buhweju is more conducive to road construction than that of Intermediate Buhweju, but steep gradients must still be negotiated and roads have had to be cut within valley sides in order to keep them above swamp level. Indeed it is the swamps within High Buhweju which are the greatest physical barrier to effective road communications. During the rainy season from April to June the flooding of the swamps makes the main roads within and out of Buhweju impassable for periods of several weeks.

The sparsity of roads entering High Buhweju (Figs.2 and 3) is directly related to the morphological character of the area. Along the eastern border of the county there is no morphological break in the enclosing ridge. It is too steep to be crossed by a motor road without a great deal of engineering and there are no accessible gaps; in fact the only gaps in this surrounding rim that could be used are one in the north, leading to Ibanda, and two in the south giving access to Mbarara. Each of these gaps carries a road. For any major commercial purpose two of these, as they now stand, may at once be eliminated as possibilities. The one to the north is too steep, and in one place crosses the face of a waterfall. Of the two in the south the most easterly one, which passes across a low col, has very steep gradients, is thickly boulder-strewn, and has become deeply gullied. Only the road which passes through the Koga water gap (Fig.2) is fit for commercial use. If communications into Buhweju are to be improved, as they must be if an expansion of the economy is envisaged, then it is this road which should be developed as the main external artery.

The difficulty of entry into and movement within Buhweju has led to a certain human isolation of the county, and it tends to stand out as a geographical island when individual aspects of its geography are compared with those of neighbouring counties. Some examples are discussed below.

Buhweju has a greater proportion of indigenous Banyankole people than any of the neighbouring counties, and a very much greater proportion than Ankole as a whole. (Table 1). This is probably a reflection of the fact that Buhweju has no wage-paying industries and there is very little inducement for migration into Buhweju; much less so than for the neighbouring counties. The breakdown of population figures (Table 2) suggests that there has in fact been a movement out of rather than into Buhweju. The male population under 16 years of age is very similar to the total female population under 16 of age in each of the four Gombololas. However, the number of males over 16 years in each case is very much less than the number of females over 16 years old. This strongly suggests that there is an exodus of working-age males out of Buhweju, though possibly on only a temporary wage-earning basis. This outward movement is in itself a direct reflection of the fact that apart from the land and family ties (which are strong) there is little inducement for a man to stay in Buhweju.

Table 1. The tribal breakdown of the populations of Ankole, Buhweju and its neighbouring counties.

Counties.	Tribal Group			
	Banyankole	Banyaruanda	Bakiga	Others
Ankole	78.3	8.7	7.5	5.5
Buhweju	94.5	2.7	1.9	0.9
Mitoma	92.5	1.2	2.2	4.1
Kashari	85.0	3.6	1.8	9.6
Shema	93.8	1.4	1.9	2.9
Igara	87.5	0.9	10.0	1.6
Bunyaruguru	72.8	4.5	7.5	15.2

Source: Uganda Population Census, 1959

Table 2. The sex-age composition of the population of Buhweju by Gombololas.  
Males:—

Gombolola	Total	Under 16	Over 16
Mumyuka	3448	1825	1623
Sabadu	1718	946	772
Sabagabo	1636	901	735
Sabawali	2466	1316	1150

Females:—

Gombolola	Total	Under 16	Over 16
Mumyuka	4056	1989	2067
Sabadu	1940	985	955
Sabagabo	1866	914	952
Sabawali	2991	1361	1630

Source:— Uganda Population Census, 1959

Table 3. Percentages of the county area under cultivation.

Buhweju	Mitoma	Kashori	Shema	Igara	Bunyaruguru
4.1	5.6	7.7	20.7	14.9	9.0

The isolation of Buhweju is also reflected in the agricultural statistics (Table 3). Buhweju for example, has 4.1% of its area under cultivation whereas adjacent counties in every case show a higher percentage.

The traveller entering Buhweju is deeply conscious of passing into an area which is "different", an area which bears a physical contrast with the area which he has just left. He is aware of crossing a marked regional boundary.