

THE GEOMORPHOLOGY OF SOUTHWEST UGANDA

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Introduction

The relief of southwest Uganda (Fig. 1) has inspired considerable interest in its geomorphological evolution. Indeed, its rift valley, volcanoes, and its history of drainage reversal has given this area a world-wide reputation (Cooke, 1958; Wayland, 1929, 1931, 1934).

The main relief units

There are three important and yet quite different ways in which the relief of south-west Uganda may be sub-divided. Firstly there is the sub-division of the area into regions based on their morphology (Fig. 2), or surface form. This is a standard practice in many regional studies and is frequently fundamental to any subsequent geographical analysis.

The second means of sub-division which is employed here is one which involves the recognition of distinct relief horizons (Fig. 3). For example, the floor of the rift valley is so far below the landscape which lies to the east, and outside the rift valley scarp, that the two may be separately described on this basis alone. In the same manner more subtle distinctions between different relief horizons within the area between the rift valley and Lake Victoria can be drawn. These differences are discussed in greater detail below.

Because of the peculiar geological history of southwest Uganda a third way of sub-dividing the relief of the area may be proposed. (Fig. 4). Whilst the rift valley was being formed, the whole of the area between the rift and Lake Victoria was being warped. Parts of it were raised by tectonic deformations, whilst others were being lowered in relation to the areas around them. This tectonic history allows a tectonic sub-division of the relief of southwest Uganda. In this third approach, an account of the effect which the tectonics had on the relief and drainage of the area may be included to provide a comprehensive understanding of the geomorphological background to the geography of southwest Uganda.

The major morphological regions

Between Lakes Edward and George in the west, and Lake Victoria in the east, the main division is between the Western Rift Valley and the whole of the area to the east (Fig. 2). Yet, this neglects the tremendous variety in the relief of the area to the east of the rift valley. Within that area a distinction may be made on morphological grounds between the mountain areas and the lowland areas. In many places the lowlands are surmounted by relatively high, frequently flat-topped hills, such as those which characterise the Buganda landscape around the western and northern margins of Lake Victoria, and these areas are of a transition type between the lowlands and the mountains.

The extremely subdued and rounded lowland hills need distinguishing from hilly areas where exposures of granite and gneiss provide inselbergs. Although inselbergs are to be found in many parts of the lowlands they sometimes occur in such dense clusters that they give rise to rocky, and sometimes even rugged, landscapes which may be separately defined as inselberg regions.

Lakes provide an important element in the geomorphology of southwest Uganda. Not only do they occur in the floor of the rift valley, and most impressive of all, as Lake Victoria, but they also occur nestled in amongst the mountains of the area. The smallest lakes are to be found within the floor of some of the