

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Uganda: A Modern History

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5xh735t8>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 12(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Ssali, Ndugu Mike

Publication Date

1983

DOI

10.5070/F7123017149

Copyright Information

Copyright 1983 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

BOOK REVIEWS

Uganda; A Modern History. Jan Jelmert Jorgensen. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1981. 381 pages, hardcover, \$27.50.

Jan J. Jorgensen has written an interesting and informative book on the contemporary history of Uganda. His work supplies us with a detailed political, social and economic history, examining in depth the tendencies which molded it from the beginning of colonial rule in 1888 to the present. More specifically, it discusses the development and integration of Uganda's economy into the World capitalist system and how this phenomenon has affected modern historical developments in this East African nation.

The first four chapters scrutinize with scholarly thoroughness the initial colonial seizure and the colonial state's role in the rural equation of chiefs, peasants and migrant workers. The book also examines the colonial state in the broad context of national, regional and international trade, and attempts to analyze the indigenous African nationalist response and the subsequent political parties which led Uganda to an independent state.

The book further looks at the post-independence political alliances and economic strategies of the Obote administration and the events of Amin's reign. Finally, the epilogue discusses the social and political dynamics of the post-Amin period and attempts to suggest ways in which Uganda may be able to solve its perennial economic and political problems in the 1980's.

Jorgensen holds that pure ethnic groups do not exist in Uganda. This point is well-taken. Understandably, it helps to underscore the point that ethnic "arrogance" in Uganda is founded on ignorance and petty self-interests of sub-cultural nationalists, making it more of a myth than a reality. He succeeds, therefore, in making a point which has often been overlooked by most scholars. Namely that, because of historical migrations, triggered by conquests, intermarriages, disease, the search for more arable and grazing land, and assimilation over the past two millennia, there are no pure ethnic groups in Uganda in the colonial sense of "tribes" or "physiognomic races." Hence the present ethnic groups in Uganda are generally the by-product of colonial consolidations and divisive policies imposed by the metropole. The diversity of Ugandans and their political organizations, however, can be understood in terms of linguistic and sociopolitical structures.

But the merit of the book lies more in its reorganization of facts contained in earlier works¹ than in adding new information.

pression here is important. For example, it is interesting to discover that the unanimous election of Sir Edward Mutesa II as Uganda's first head of State and president in 1963, was an absolute sham! The fact is, according to Jorgensen, Obote's Uganda's People's Congress (UPC) had entered into a semi-covert agreement to designate the Kabaka as head of State in Uganda. In return, the Kabaka's Buganda government agreed to block the Democratic Party (DP) in Buganda and to support the UPC in forming the post-colonial regime (p. 202). Hence the ascendancy of Obote as Uganda's first prime minister.

As in *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda*² by Mahmood Mamdani, Jorgensen's thesis clearly restates (with a few exceptions) and rephrases the complexity of Obote's shifting political alliances. It is interesting to note that both Mamdani's and Jorgensen's research demonstrate the extent to which the power structure in Uganda is replete with changing political alliances. If politics is the art of expedient manipulations, then the fact that post-Independence regimes in Uganda have used inherited colonial tactics to rule their populace is embarrassing and ironic.

The author, like a few scholars before him, demonstrates the extent to which Buganda has always been part of the "dominant" political equation in Uganda. From 1962 (the year Uganda attained her political independence), to 1964, the UPC under Obote in alliance with the Kabaka Yekka (KY) and Mutesa II, ruled over Uganda. Paradoxically, it was under Binaisa's* legal political expertise that the 1962 Constitution was abrogated and the 1967 Republican Constitution came into being. The latter abolished the Kingdoms, of which Buganda was the most powerful. Between 1969 and 1970, Obote introduced the "Common Man's Charter" which advocated the transformation of Uganda into a socialist state, a move which proved unpopular among the Baganda Kulak and cost him their support. As a result, Obote and the UPC allied with the professionals: state functionaries and the Asian commercial bourgeoisie who had no traditional political base and could therefore support him as long as their interests were not directly threatened. The "Common Man's Charter" as Mamdani has persuasively argued, was at best rhetorical, coupled with a limited measure of practice. In that case, contrary to its purported intentions as a blue print for the redistribution of goods and services among Ugandans, the "Charter" can be viewed as Obote's political pawn for the acquisition of new allies. Not surprisingly, however, Amin's coup of January 1971 initially brought the Baganda back into the noticeable political equation. It was a brief alliance.

*The Attorney General of Uganda at the time.

Consistent with historical and conventional wisdom that man does not make history except to share it, Jorgensen nearly succeeds in playing down the role of Uganda's major political actors, preferring instead the view that events explain the actors' apparently deliberate decisions. If true, as the author would seem to suggest, that British Colonial policy, tactics and strategies were often calculated and deliberate, then, there appears to be no reason why Obote or Amin cannot be held responsible for the major decisions in their respective administrations. Although the author portrays Obote as a master political strategist and tactician, he, however, fails miserably to provide convincing explanations as to why Obote did not act with resolve to forestall Amin's coup. Nor does the author question Obote's judgement and motives for the promotion and appointment of an officer of Amin's character to a strategic command position against British and Ugandan Senior Officials' recommendations. For reasons, perhaps, best known to Obote himself, he in effect placed Amin on a launching pad whence the general and his foreign supporters pulled off a coup and systematically destroyed what was once dubbed as the "pearl of Africa."

The author contends that the Southerners in the military during the Amin coup generally supported the changing of the guard. Nothing could be further from the truth. First of all it is erroneous to look at "Southerners" in Uganda as if they were a homogeneous group. During that period, this writer was a "Southern" officer with the Uganda Armed Forces, but at no time did he feel or act as the author claims. If there were soldiers who felt and acted as a group of Southerners, it must have been in their imagination! While it may be true, as the author points out, that at the time of the coup, the Air Force tended to be dominated by "Southerners," it is not accurate, however, to assume that they indeed welcomed the coup (p. 269). Clearly, as with the Malire Mechanised Regiment and the Burma garrison, at Jinja which were taken over by the Amin Loyalist forces (mainly from West-Nile, Madi regions and elements of the "Nubian" or "anyanya" exile groups) in the early morning of January 25, 1971, the Air Force at Entebbe was overrun by a detachment from the Malire barracks. Members of the Air Force who escaped physical elimination found themselves faced with one choice: apathy! In fact, Amin used to refer to soldiers and officers from areas outside his own and the North as "fence sitters" who were only waiting to side with the "winner."

Unfortunately, some of Jorgensen's information based on British journalist David Martin's book, *General Amin*, is grossly inaccurate. For example, it is not correct to suggest that the Malire Mechanised Regiment was located near Bombo at the time of the Coup, as is claimed. Instead, Malire was lo-

cated at Mengo, Kabaka's former palace, one of the celebrated seven hills on which Kampala, the Ugandan capital, sits. In fact, at the time of the coup, there were no existing military barracks near Bombo. The barracks at Bombo were built during the early years of Amin's rule, and renamed Malire, following the 1974 abortive coup led by Brigadier Charles Arube. It should also be pointed out that the cohort of approximately twenty-three Army officers who held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel or higher at the time of the coup (see table 6.1, p. 269) also included Col. Musa, from the West Nile region, who survived but was dismissed after the coup; Col. William Ndahendekire (Sandhurst trained), from Ankole, who survived but was dismissed in 1972 (the official reason given for this was "in the public interest"), Lt. Col. Francis Nyangweso from Bukedi, who survived and served in the Amin administration as Army Commander, Cabinet Minister and ambassador to the Central African Republic, respectively. Lt. Col. Oyok, from Acholi, did not survive. It may also be important to note that William Omaria, at the time of the coup held the rank of captain and not that of a colonel or higher. It is equally incorrect to suggest that Charles Oboth-Ofumbi held a military rank at the time of the coup. On the contrary, he was a top civil servant who held the position of Permanent Secretary of Defense.

The author may have a point in disputing the high figures of those victims of Amin's rule, but given other estimates by other services such as Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists ranging from 80,000 to 300,000, his range of 12,000 to 30,000 would appear to be an understatement. Although Ugandan exile sources have consistently put the toll at 500,000, which observers consider an exaggeration, given that many of these deaths were not documented, the actual figures, unfortunately, may never be known. It may also be true, however, that under the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF) and the UPC regimes the numbers continued to rise!

The author's treatment of the causes which led to the expulsion of the Asians would appear to be filled with flaws, given that one element of Ugandan society, the Baganda bureaucrats, traders and Kulaks, is emphasized as being primarily responsible. Although his historical analysis of the Asians as migrant residents in Uganda is valid, his charges against Baganda interest groups seem to be less credible. It is the present writer's contention that the Asian problem in post-independence Uganda, viewed in its proper perspective, should be analyzed as a national issue. If the Ugandan Asian Community had made meaningful efforts to integrate itself into the nation's social, political and cultural fabric, it is highly debatable whether Amin's decision of expulsion would have gained "widespread" domestic support.

Although Jorgensen concludes that stable government would

satisfy most Ugandans in the 1980's, he does not say how this can be achieved. Nevertheless, the present book, born out of a mixture of emotional and academic curiosity, still, is a substantial contribution to the subject. It is a commendable work considering that the author spent a reasonable period of time in Uganda interviewing "authorities" on certain aspects of the subject in addition to utilizing archives in both Entebbe and London. Some of his sources, therefore are virtually incontrovertible, given that they appear in his fieldnotes. On the whole, this book serves as a useful guide not only for specialists in the field who seek to understand the workings of colonialism and neo-colonialism, but also for general readership.

Ndugu Mike Ssali
Ph.D. student, African
History and Film,
UCLA

NOTES

¹ See in particular: Gukina, Peter M. *A Case Study in African Political Development*, Notre Dame Press, 1972 and Kasfir, Nelson, "Cultural Sub-nationalism in Uganda" in *The Politics of Cultural Sub-Nationalism in Africa*, Victor Olorunsola (ed.), Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, 1972, pp. 51-148.

² Mamdani, Mahmood, *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1976.

³ Martin, David, *General Amin*, Faber and Faber, London, 1974.

* * * * *

Ethiopia and Eritrea During the Scramble for Africa: A Political Biography of Ras Alula, 1875-1897. Erlich Haggai. *Ethiopian Series Monograph* No. 11. Michigan State University, East Lansing, 1982. 221 pages. Bibliography.

In the last two decades, Ethiopian historiography has made a notable advance in the investigation of a hitherto insufficiently studied period of Ethiopian history, namely the last two decades of the 19th century, i.e., when the real threat to Ethiopia's independence arose, between 1870-1896. A substantial part of this advance is due to the painstaking research effort of Ethiopian and foreign historians.

The period between 1870 and 1896 stands as a watershed in the annals of political, diplomatic and military history of