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THE RISE AND FALL OF THE PHILOSOPHER KING IN EAST AFRICA: THE VIEW FROM UGANDA

Ali A. Mazrui

No country in Africa has had a wider range of Heads of State than Uganda. The diversity has been from a King (Mutesa II) to a peasant (Idi Amin); from a university president (Y.K. Lule) to the basically illiterate (Tito Okello), and of course from civilians (e.g. G. Binaisa and A. M. Obote) to soldiers (Amin and Tito Okello). Yoweri Museveni, the latest of Uganda's rulers, cuts across these social differentiations. Although himself a commoner, he comes from the aristocratic traditions of Ankole. Although originally a civilian politician, he became a soldier and created his own army. Although basically an intellectual, he identifies with the common folk - and has tended to play down his intellectual credentials in more recent time.

This article focuses especially on the intellectual theme in East Africa's history - with special reference to the dream of a "philosopher-king" presiding over Africa's affairs of state. Part of the phenomenon is the rise and fall of radicalism based on documentary proclamations - what might be called *documentary radicalism* in East Africa's history of ideas.

Uganda's neighbors - Kenya and Tanzania - have of course had more stability and fewer heads of state since independence than Uganda. The death of Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta in 1978 was followed peacefully by the accession of Daniel arap Moi to the Presidency. The retirement of Julius K. Nyerere in 1985 from the Presidency was followed by the smooth succession of Ali Hassan Mwinyi as Head of State.

From the point of view of this article, what should be noted is that Mwinyi is less of a philosophical intellectual than Nyerere; and Moi has less of a record as a writer than Kenyatta. In Kenya and Tanzania,

the idea of a philosopher king has become less credible since the respective departures of Kenyatta and Nyerere. In Uganda under Yoweri Museveni, a new philosopher king *may* be in the making and yet for the time being Museveni shows no signs of wishing to revive the tradition of documentary radicalism which was such a highly publicized feature of East Africa's first decade of independence. Is Museveni content to be a "warrior-king" as opposed to a philosophical monarch? This is one of the most tantalizing questions hanging over the new dawn in Uganda.

At the centre of this whole dialectic between politics and intellectualism in East Africa is a much older and more profound dialectic between oral and the written traditions in the human condition. Independence saw East Africa caught up in the grand transition from the indigenous tradition of almost pure oral politics to the externally stimulated fascination with the written though arguable political word.

One question which has arisen in the 1980s is whether East Africa is returning to the oral tradition in politics. Does Nyerere's exit in Tanzania lead on to a less literary style of political leadership? Did the two momentous deaths of Tom Mboya in 1969 and Jomo Kenyatta in 1978 in Kenya seal the fate of the philosophical style? Is Museveni's decision to play down his intellectualism another nail in the coffin of the philosopher-king? Let us look at the march of recent history.

The Written Word and the Human Condition

The written word is often regarded as a medium of conversation, rather than a method of transformation. Ideas which are articulated in countries which do not reduce their thoughts to writing can be very perishable indeed. Where is the wealth of Africa's wisdom over the centuries? We had great philosophers, great mystics, even great eccentrics trying out new ideas. But much of that old intellectual activity and energy has simply been lost to us. Yes, we do indeed have an oral tradition. Some of Africa's wisdom has been transmitted, from generation to generation, by word of mouth and through various forms of rituals. But oral tradition tends, overwhelmingly, to be a transmission of consensus rather than heresy, of accepted ideas rather than innovative intellectual departures. In Africa's history, many of the latter kind of ideas, which might indeed have commanded acceptance one or two generations later, died very early because they were not preserved. Those with human features and values nevertheless still persist.

And yet in that very observation lies the paradox of dual function

which has characterized the written word. On the one hand, there is the role of the written word as a medium of conserving the thoughts and traditions of a society; and on the other, there is the startling fact that among the most conservative of all societies are those which have no tradition of writing. How do we explain this paradox? First, by differentiating things which change faster when there is no written word from things which do not. Then we could examine the general impact which presence or absence of writing could have on problems of identity in a given society. And we hope to relate these factors to East Africa's experience as such.

Among the things which change very fast where there is no "widespread" tradition of writing is, quite simply, language itself. Ki-Swahili has had a written tradition for several centuries, but the written style was not specially widespread. One consequence of this is that the Ki-Swahili of the 1850s is much more different from the Ki-Swahili of the 1970s, than the English of the 1850s is different from the English of the 1980s. English has changed less rapidly partly because of the conserving influence of a literate culture on the language as a whole. It is true that literacy in the early part of the 19th century in England was far from universal as yet. But the literate section of the community had become so big, and its impact on the rest of the population so great, that much of the language of the upper classes of 19th century England has survived with little change to the 1980s.

Luganda has also used the printed word for a number of generations. But because Kiganda was not as yet a substantially literate culture, the Luganda of the 1850s is also more different from the Luganda of the 1980s.

There are occasions when a culture which is not widely literate nevertheless succeeds in conserving much of the language. But even here the actual art of writing has a lot to do with it.

The influence of the Qur'an on the Arabic language is a case in point. The style of the Qur'an linguistically captured the imagination of the Arabs. There was a vigour of expression, and sometimes beauty of execution which resulted in a whole new doctrine within Islam - the doctrine that the Qur'an was inimitable. And among the miracles of the Prophet Mohammad was included the miracle of the Qur'an itself as a work of literature.

But although the Arabs had this doctrine of Qur'anic inimitability, the book exerted so much influence that many writers attempted to imitate its style. The doctrine was that the Qur'an could not be effectively imitated - but many literary figures after Mohammad had a jolly good try all the same.

The result is that the Qur'an more than any other book, or any other factor, has been responsible for the survival of classical Arabic for so long. Spoken idiomatic Arabic in one part of the Arab world can be very different from spoken Arabic in another. It can even be mutually unintelligible. But the Arabic on a printed page from a newspaper in Iran is often easily understood by a literate Arab in Egypt or Nigeria.

These literate Arabs also speak classical Arabic, as well as the colloquial Arabic of their own countries. When they want to understand each other across national frontiers, the solution is to fall back on classical Arabic - transmitted through the generations, and preserved in its sounds by the influence of the Qur'an and the mystique of reciting the Qur'an.

Documentary Radicalism in Kenya and Tanzania

Documentary radicalism in East Africa is, in its mature stage, a post-colonial phenomenon. It is an attempt to capture in documents or philosophical tracts a vision of a new society to be created. It is the utilization of the printed word for purposes of formulating new social directions and new political goals.

By a curious destiny, documentary radicalism is in some respects an older phenomenon in Kenya than in the other two countries of East Africa. This is partly connected with the seniority in age and in political participation of the top man in Kenya upon independence as compared with his counterparts in Uganda and Tanzania. Kenyatta's utilization of the written word for active political purposes went back to the 1920s and 1930s. At that time, there was an element of nostalgia in his radicalism. Perhaps that was inevitable in the colonial period. The nature of nationalistic assertion was not simply a commitment to transforming society, but also a commitment to returning to the fullness of one's identity as a free man. Nationalism, when activated by colonial domination, tended to include a love of tradition and a longing for a restoration of indigenous independence.

Facing Mount Kenya, the historic book by Kenyatta, was first published in 1938. It was in part a groping to create a new identity for the Kikuyu following the devastating impact of the colonial intrusion. But the book also included, in its many attempts to relate Kikuyu experience to western concepts, the dream to revive the old in terms which took account of the new.

Kenyatta's participation also in founding an early Kikuyu newspaper was part of the genesis of documentary radicalism in Kenya. But at that level the nostalgia was persistent. The vision was not simply

of the future, but also of the past.

In the 1950s the torch passed to Tom Mboya. Mboya also entered into the field of using the printed word for purposes of expressing an inner African dignity, or of demanding a restoration of what was due to the nation. After Mboya's period at Ruskin College, Oxford, he, encouraged by Margery Perham, produced a pamphlet.

But much of the documentary radicalism of the pre-independence period was addressed to an audience outside the colonies. It was often addressed to the metropolitan countries as an appeal or propaganda to public opinion there, as an attempt to influence directions of policy in the capital of the empire.

Following independence, Nyerere next door in Tanzania was already experimenting with the idea of capturing his thoughts in writing. Pamphlets like *Ujamaa: The Basis of African Socialism and Democracy and the Party System* were among these early enterprises by Nyerere. But again the radicalism seemed to be tamed by nostalgia. The concept of *Ujamaa*, defined now as socialism but tied to the ideas of kinship solidarity, was in the tradition of that school of innovation which sought to maintain its links with its historical and cultural past. Even Nyerere's ideas of democracy, comparing an electoral system with a system under which the Elders sat under a tree, and talked until they agreed, was also an attempt to fuse a vision of the new Africa, with a vision of the old.

Each of the three countries of East Africa had different reasons for gradually moving towards documentary radicalism as a basis of social and political reform. In the case of Tanzania, the personality of Julius Nyerere himself, and the fact that he was an intellectual, was an important reason behind this tendency. Julius Nyerere was the most intellectual of all the Heads of State that English-speaking Africa has had so far. An educated intellectual tends to have literary tendencies. Nyerere started quite early putting down his thoughts in writing and establishing a reputation as a philosopher President. He liked to play with ideas, and to intellectualize about the problems of his society. He liked to theorize about the nature of Africa's past and the direction of Africa's future. In addition, Nyerere was keen on what might be called intellectual bridge-making - the idea of establishing links between cultural and ideological heritage of Africa with the cultural and ideological heritage of the rest of the world.

Nyerere's attempts at the Africanization of socialism and the Africanization of liberal ideas fell within this general attempt of bridge-making. But in addition, he had also an interest in creative literature and its translation. His translation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* into Ki-Swahili was an important aspect of this side

of Nyerere's literary and creative concerns.

Nyerere's popular designation as the *Mwalimu* (teacher or mentor) also indicated a leaning towards the world of learning. He is still affectionately known as *Mwalimu* both because he was once a teacher in a school, but also because his type of leadership has always had a high didactic component, and made him assume the role of a national mentor. All these elements were important contributory factors towards the consolidation of documentary radicalism in Tanzania.

Yet, again, it was Kenya rather than either Tanzania or Uganda which first put documentary radicalism on an official basis. Nyerere's earlier writings were mainly speeches and papers prepared for special occasions. There was no attempt to make the earlier documents an official embodiment of party ideology and a guide to policy-making on a day to day basis. Nyerere's pamphlets of *Ujamaa* and *One Party Democracy* were basically intellectual exercises by a Head of State, though they were exercises which also did bear a relevance for policy. Much of the earlier work of Nyerere consisted of explanations of ideological positions and rationalizations of trends. There was no attempt to form a blue-print for the future until the Arusha Declaration exploded on to the East African ideological world in 1967.

But it was *Sessional Paper No. 10* in Kenya which was first proclaimed as a blue-print to guide governmental policy. Kenyatta virtually described *Sessional Paper No. 10* as the new political bible of the country. Debates upon whether it has been implemented or not will continue for quite a while. It is arguable that many of the proposals of *Sessional Paper No. 10* have in fact been fulfilled either in part or in entirety. The late Tom Mboya engaged in debate with Ahmed Mohiddin, then of the Department of Political Science at Makerere, not long before Mboya's assassination. Mohiddin's position had been that Kenya's African socialism, as enunciated and implemented, was neither socialist nor African. Mboya retorted that it was both and went on to argue that commitment to development did involve systematic creation of wealth even if some of the repercussions might for the time being be undesirable. But whether Kenya's *Sessional Paper No. 10* was really guided policy or not, historically it remains the first official proclamation of documentary radicalism in East Africa.

Documentary Radicalism in Uganda

Uganda in 1969 and 1970 pulled ahead in the same trend. Five documents were pronounced as the new blue-print for the country. *The Common Man's Charter*, *The National Service Proposals*, *The*

Proclamation from the Chair, The Nakivubo Pronouncements, and Documents No. 5 concerning multiple constituencies for members of parliament and the method of electing the President, were cumulatively and with a great impact contributed into the mainstream of documentary radicalism in East Africa.

Why were documents sometimes treated with such momentous reverence and acclaim in East Africa in the 1960s and early 1970s? People walked dozens of miles in Tanzania to affirm their commitment to the Arusha Declaration. President Nyerere himself engaged in a long walk of over a hundred miles as a similar demonstration of commitment to a document which he himself had written.

In Uganda too, there was tremendous activity associated with the launching of the different documents under Obote's first administration. *The Common Man's Charter* was treated with great acclaim, and some did indeed take long walks in Uganda too, as a method of affirming commitment to the Charter. The National Service proposals were also subjected to a good deal of discussion in different parts of the country. The relevant Ministers went exploring opinion, and explaining implications.

The Communication from the Chair and the Nakivubo Pronouncements were in many ways a different category of documents. There was some general discussion, and some acclaim. But there were enough sensitive areas to these subjects to make the discussion more subdued.

Document No. 5 on the election of the President and parliamentarians, received a level of open debate greater than that experienced in the case of the *Common Man's Charter* itself. There were no marches in affirmation of loyalty to *Document No. 5*, but there was more genuine discourse and analysis. The levels of open debate ranged from extra-mural lectures in relatively isolated areas of Uganda, to publicized discussions between members of the Cabinet and members of Makerere University.

In short, we may say that the first of the documents, *The Common Man's Charter*, in Uganda received a lot of affirmation and acclaim but more subdued debate. The last of the five documents, *Document No. 5*, received acclamation and some affirmation, but there was franker discussion, more candid dissent, than in the previous ones.

Why was there this drift towards documentary radicalism in Uganda? Why indeed were documents so important in African experience in that first decade of independence? This is where the paradox of the dual function of the written word enters the field once again. Societies which have no written word are beset by the fear of

losing identity precisely because the oral tradition is so manipulative and so perishable. Because the transmission of the society's mores and values is by word of mouth, from generation to generation, the fear of losing social identity leads to a profound conservatism. Traditional societies without the printed word, precisely because they lack that great preservative of culture, are thrown back to a militant protection of their traditions. The voices of heresy rise and fall; many die unheard; certainly most die uncelebrated.

Widespread literacy could conquer this fear of losing identity. The values of the society become captured in the written word. The populace as a whole has access to them through moderate reading ability. The fear of losing identity gives way to some state of innovation. Heresies may be unattended to for a while, but because they are conserved in writing, they may inspire rethinking a generation or two later.

In the case of East Africa there was another purpose served by the written word. This is in the quest to move from a society of political culture to a society of ideology. Every major ideology is a potential political culture, but it does not become a political culture until it has succeeded in establishing roots. The alleged new political culture in Uganda in the 1960s was in fact a political culture in the making, rather than an accomplished fact. An ideology seeking to replace an old culture sometimes needs to give itself the concrete form of written analysis and defined intentions. Documentary radicalism in Uganda in the first decade of independence could therefore be described as primarily a transition from an old political culture, through a new ideology, onwards to a new political culture. The written word served as a transmission device between two phenomena which might otherwise be very different. Oral tradition, spoken word passing from one generation to another, was an exercise in transmitting what already had roots. Documentary radicalism on the other hand, was an exercise in transmitting what *aspired* to have roots, but which was for the time being confronting the resistance of older norms and habits.

A further factor to be borne in mind is that writing in contemporary Africa is sometimes an institutionalization of personality. Oral literature in traditional Africa, the folk tales and songs, were offering a literature without authors. There was a collectivism about that kind of literature. Who wrote such and such a song? No one knows, it has been sung for generations.

But in Africa's post-colonial conditions, major works of documentation at this stage tend to seek identification with personal leadership. Institutions are weak; personalities are needed to make up

for deficiencies in institutions. But personalities themselves need additional strength to make them more effective as substitutes for fragile structures. In the first decade of independence, capturing a leader's ideas in documents became a kind of institutionalization of personality. Documents served both this purpose and the additional purpose of being a concretization of thought.

Back to the Future

But why then did the euphoria of documentary radicalism *decline* from the second decade of East Africa's independence onwards? In Uganda, there was the political succession under Idi Amin of people who either belonged completely to the oral tradition or were at best on the border-line between literacy and illiteracy. Under Idi Amin, the political forces were in the direction of a return to the spoken word. After the brief literary interlude of Milton Obote's "Move to the Left", Uganda returned to oral politics - and to the theatre of verbal humor. Idi Amin moved to centre stage - and here the King became his own Jester in a brilliant display of oral buffoonery.

In Kenya, the decline of documentary radicalism began with the assassination of Tom Mboya in 1969, the most intellectually promising of all Kenya's politicians. The decline of the literary style was aggravated by Kenyatta's own advancing age. The dream of the philosopher-king gave way to the reality of the elder tradition. The founding father's advancing years not only reduced prospects for a literacy output; it also reduced prospects even for sustained *oral* wisdom. The cult of "Mzee" - the Old Man - triumphed over the vision of the philosopher-king.

Documentary radicalism lasted the longest in Tanzania. A central reason was the resilience of Julius Nyerere himself as an intellectual in politics. A related factor was the continuing importance of the *Arusha Declaration* - even when its principles were being violated by bureaucrats of both the state and the party.

But even in Tanzania the euphoria of documentary radicalism was dying out by the end of the 1970s. Disenchantment with Africa's post-colonial performance discredited the idea of documented intentions. In the face of subsequent empirical failure, who wants the accusing finger of written goals declared beforehand? In the face of a vision unfulfilled, who wants to be reminded of the original documented formulation?

Documentary radicalism in Uganda died more immediately than in other two countries. Replacing Obote's "Move to the Left" with Idi

Amin's theatre of the absurd was a case of an abrupt interruption of a radical symphony.

Idi Amin lasted in power for over eight years. He was succeeded by professor Yusufu Lule, former Head of Makerere University (College then) and former Secretary-General of the Association of African Universities. Lule in turn was succeeded by Godfrey Binaisa, a Legal Counsel of Queen Elizabeth II (Q.C.). There was a chance of resurrecting the dream of a Philosopher King - though not necessarily of *radical* persuasion. And yet it did not happen. Lule lasted only 68 days and Binaisa lasted eleven months.

Obote's return to power in 1980 (via Paulo Muwanga) raised the question of whether he would resume ideologically where he left off. Would Obote resume the momentum of trying to move Uganda to the left?

However, in his exile (1971-1980) in Tanzania, Obote had encountered at first hand the disenchantment with the socialist euphoria - the disappointments of the Arusha Declaration. By the time Obote resumed the Ugandan presidency in 1980, he was to the right of the Obote of 1970. He was disillusioned with documentary radicalism.

Tito Okello's brief interlude in 1985 was, in fact, not only a *no-man's land*, it was basically a *no-mind's land*. There was no special re-thinking undertaken on the national condition. The country merely drifted.

Yoweri Museveni's final triumph in Kampala in January 1986 raised the issue of whether documentary radicalism was at last about to return to Uganda.* Museveni is a university graduate with a history of radical socialist commitment. His links with FRELIMO in Mozambique's pre-independence days helped to make Museveni a disciple in militarized socialism. Yet, in his struggle to mobilize the masses in Southern Uganda, Museveni discovered that Uganda was not yet ready for socialism even as a slogan. He had to learn to play down the socialist slogans of class struggle - and play up patriotism and the liberal struggles of human rights and free elections. The inner Museveni may still be socialist; the outer Museveni is now clearly liberal.

The question which remains is whether East Africa's last hope of a philosopher king is in Uganda - rather than in either Kenya or Tanzania. In the shadow of Daniel arap Moi, Kenya may still be as

* As evidenced by Museveni's book, *Selected Articles on the Uganda Resistance War*. Kampala: NRM Publications, Second Edition, 1986, whose review appears in this issue. (Ed. P.G.O.)

pragmatic as ever - but literary and philosophical concerns are more on the defensive than ever as the state has got more distrustful of intellectualism.

In Tanzania after Nyerere the push is towards ideological revisionism and "realism". Mwinyi's voice is a counsel for caution and "moderation".

Museveni has not yet produced a blue-print of transformation. He is the most intellectual of all the three Heads of State of East Africa in 1987. But is he the last hope for a philosopher-king in East Africa? Or is he just another flash in the "Pan" in Uganda? We must wait and see.