1 *Refractions*

Beholding Uganda

Does Uganda Have a History?

This question is not supposed to be a deliberate insult to nearly forty million Ugandans, or to the decades of work undertaken by their historians and producers of culture; nor is it a throwback to an older idea that Africans possessed no such thing as 'history' until Europeans showed up to inject some purpose into their lives. Rather, the issue is whether, and to what extent, *Uganda*, as a national entity, has a history, and whether it is remotely possible to aim for an integrated view of the nation's past. In that sense, the question is a little more complicated than might first appear, and it very much depends on how we interpret it. Critically, for example, who exactly is part of that history? Even defining Ugandan history in the putatively straightforward terms of territorially delineated entity is problematic, given that the precise boundaries of the British Protectorate were not finally settled until 1926, when the administrative sector then known as Rudolf Province, in the far northeast, was transferred to Kenya. Similarly, West Nile district, in the northwest, was initially part of Belgian Congo, was then briefly administered as part of Sudan, and was only transferred to Uganda in 1912. Earlier still, a swathe of what would become western Kenya was originally considered part of the Uganda Protectorate, when the partition of the region was in motion, and only became part of Kenya in 1902.[1] Even after 1926, the question of where 'Uganda' ends and somewhere else begins has been raised periodically: by Idi Amin in the late 1970s, for example, when the President – himself from a transnational group, the Kakwa, straddling the Ugandan-Congolese border in the northwest – laid claim to a chunk of territory south of the Kagera River in Tanzania. Indeed a few years earlier Amin had also demanded the return of western Kenya to Uganda, considering this swathe of the

[1] H.B. Thomas & R. Scott, *Uganda* (London, 1935), 41.

Kenyan Highlands an intrinsic part of his domain. In recent years, President Yoweri Museveni has questioned whether certain groups hovering nervously on the territorial peripheries of the nation are *really Ugandan* – symptomatic of one of the recurrent themes in the country's past, namely anxieties around claims to land, citizenship and belonging. And so questions of territorial delimitation do not necessarily lead to neat answers. Such is the problem with histories of nations – and to be sure, *all* nations have similar tales of peripheral ambiguity. To borrow the famous refrain of immigrant Mexicans to the United States: 'We didn't cross the border; the border crossed us'.

Then there is the very name of the place itself. *Uganda* is essentially a mispronunciation of *Buganda* – the state with which most visitors in the late nineteenth century engaged. Swahili traders, dropping the 'b' from most African place names in the interior, rendered Buganda thus, and the British followed suit. It meant (as did Buganda in the Luganda language) 'the place of the Ganda'. The irony is clear enough: the entire country which was placed under British rule, of which the Buganda kingdom was but one part – albeit an important one – was named after that kingdom, even though the territory encompassed dozens of groups which were distinct in language, culture, economy, political process. This is, to an extent, an accident of history, or more aptly of historical geography.

Nonetheless, leaving such ambiguities aside for the moment, the existence of Uganda's history as a sovereign entity since 9 October 1962, the date on which it achieved independence from Britain, seems undeniable. This was driven home in a very public fashion by the celebration and reflection that attended the nation's fiftieth birthday in 2012 – a noteworthy landmark, and one awarded the appropriate significance by the government, media, business and civil society alike.[2] Several important narratives emerged in the course of the year – in speeches made, in essays written in the mainstream press, in public discussions printed and broadcast – which combined to apparently demonstrate *the history of Uganda*: an integrated, singular history; a *national history*, albeit one largely envisioned and articulated by a metropolitan

[2] A number of glossy publications appeared to mark the occasion, and are a mine of 'local knowledge': see, for example, Fountain Publishers' *Independent Uganda: the first 50 years* (Kampala, 2012), and the *Daily Monitor*'s collection of features and articles, *Understand Uganda: 50 years of independence, 9 October 1962 – 9 October 2012* (Kampala, 2012).

middle class. That history dwelt on anticolonial struggle against the British, and the heroes of that struggle; the monstrous darkness that enveloped Uganda during the 1970s under Idi Amin, and the violent aftermath; the resilience of Ugandans in overcoming war, dictatorship, poverty and the AIDS epidemic to build a national community of growing strength and confidence.

Yet what does it mean to write the history of an African nation in the early twenty-first century? The histories of nations are problematic affairs at the best of times – that is, even when there is a degree of received wisdom surrounding the existence of the nation itself, and a critical mass of literature pointing to the fact. There may be disagreement over the antiquity of the concept, and rival interpretations around the provenance and evolution of the accoutrements, the signs and symbols, of the nation.[3] But the histories of African nations can be especially contorted and difficult projects, certainly if the aim of the latter is to demonstrate that nations themselves add up to rather more than the sum of their parts. What, after all, *are* nations in Africa, and how should one go about thinking about their historical trajectory and composition?[4] It has been some time since histories of African nations were mainstream within the professional academy. But in the 1960s and 1970s, much pioneering Africanist historiography was framed in national – indeed sometimes *nationalist* – terms.[5] Newly sovereign African nations were implicitly or otherwise awarded the gravity and ballast of antiquity, most notably by those scholars associated with or inspired by the 'Dar es Salaam school' in Tanzania.[6] National history-writing arguably reached a highpoint with John Iliffe's *Modern History of Tanganyika*, widely regarded as one of the finest examples of the genre and one to which aspirant authors must routinely pay homage

[3] For example, M. Guibernau & J. Hutchinson (eds.), *History and National Destiny: ethnosymbolism and its critics* (Oxford, 2004).

[4] See also R.J. Reid, 'States of Anxiety: history and nation in modern Africa', *Past and Present*, 229:1 (2015).

[5] J. Lonsdale, 'The emergence of African nations', in T.O. Ranger (ed.), *Emerging Themes of African History* (Nairobi, 1968).

[6] Ranger (ed.), *Emerging Themes*; A.D. Roberts (ed.), *Tanzania Before 1900* (Nairobi, 1968); I.N. Kimambo & A.J. Temu (eds.), *A History of Tanzania* (Nairobi, 1969); B.A. Ogot (ed.), *Kenya Before 1900* (Nairobi, 1976); A.D. Roberts, *A History of Zambia* (New York, 1976). For a critique, see D. Denoon & A. Kuper, 'Nationalist Historians in Search of a Nation: the "new historiography" in Dar es Salaam', *African Affairs*, 69:277 (1970).

in their own endeavours.[7] Yet by the 1980s few folk were writing the histories of nations, which had been displaced by transnational or regional history,[8] or micro studies of specific bits of nations – the latter increasingly seen as obscuring more than they illuminated in terms of African agency and experience. The revolution which elevated 'history from below' to the mainstream likewise sidelined the nation as a unit of study. And after all, the crisis of legitimacy for the nation itself in Africa, by the 1980s, had depleted the confidence of an earlier generation, and accordingly delegitimised the defining of one's research in strictly national terms.[9] More recently, the nation has been critically deconstructed in terms of claims on citizenship, and questions have been asked about whether they were, after all, the inevitable outcome of decolonisation.[10] A subfield has recently begun to emerge around the study of national days and independence jubilees in modern Africa.[11]

It is true that much of the earlier 'national' work took for granted, very largely, that the nation itself existed; or at least the *place* existed and therefore it was assumed – quite rightly, up to a point – to be a legitimate exercise to tell the story of what had happened *inside* that place. These were, after all, sovereign entities and therefore they had histories. And so it is in more recent years, too, for the handful of scholars who have attempted similar projects. In Dan Branch's outstanding history of independent Kenya, for example, there is no existential crisis, no wrestling with whether or not a history of Kenya is

[7] J. Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, 1979).

[8] A. Zimmerman, 'Africa in Imperial and Transnational History: multi-sited historiography and the necessity of theory', *Journal of African History*, 54:3 (2013).

[9] In arguably the most extreme case, Somalia, a change of title was required: in its first incarnation, I.M. Lewis's classic text was published as *The Modern History of Somaliland* (London, 1965), but in its final edition it had become *A Modern History of the Somali* (Oxford, 2002), owing to the effective disappearance of the nation-state.

[10] S. Dorman, D. Hammett & P. Nugent (eds.), *Making Nations, Creating Strangers: states and citizenship in Africa* (Leiden, 2007); F. Cooper, 'Possibility and Constraint: African independence in historical perspective', *Journal of African History*, 49:2 (2008), and more recently his *Africa in the World: capitalism, empire, nation-state* (Cambridge MA, 2014); P. Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: autochthony, citizenship and exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago, 2009).

[11] See, for example, a recent special issue of *Nations and Nationalism*, 19:2 (2013), comprising especially pertinent essays by Carola Lentz, Christine Fricke, Konstanze N'Guessan and Izabela Orlowska.

even a worthwhile and valid exercise.[12] Kenya simply *is*, albeit in complicated ways. Perhaps this is a reflection of the self-confidence of the Kenyanist academy. But likewise in John McCracken's long-awaited and empirically robust study of Malawi, there is no time wasted on pondering the conceptualisation of Malawi as a unit of historical study; for McCracken, one of the world's leading experts on the place, the genealogies of Malawi are clear, and indisputable, and straightforwardly demarcated.[13] This is striking, given the broader context of a postmodern turn *against* the nation as a unit of study in the Africanist academy; but then McCracken is a scion of the Dar es Salaam school, as he himself would cheerily admit. Gewald, Hinfelaar and Macola's critically reflective approach to Zambia is something of an exception, as is Alexander Johnston's study of South Africa, the latter part of a Bloomsbury series on the 'invention' of the nation;[14] but a number of recent histories of nations have been fairly linear narratives which are generally unconcerned with deeper existential or ontological issues.[15] More generally, Africa is seen as comprising a peculiar set of cases: arguably with the exception of Ethiopia, and certainly at one time Somalia – singled out for particular attention, for example, by Ernest Gellner[16] – African nations are more often the exotic receptacles of a host of often distinctively potent *subnational* identities, which normatively threaten to rip apart the artificial national entity itself, or at least to claim it for themselves and use it for the advancement of their own agendas.

So, what about the entity itself, the *place* called Uganda? Does the nation itself have a history, or do we only tell the histories of the peoples who happen to live within those boundaries? Yoweri Museveni was in no doubt that Uganda did indeed have a history, if a short and troubled one, when in 2012, during the celebrations marking fifty years of independence, he publicly repented on behalf of all Ugandans for their manifold sins.[17] Presumably, too, did George Wilberforce Kakoma,

[12] D. Branch, *Kenya: between hope and despair, 1963–2011* (New Haven, 2011).
[13] J. McCracken, *A History of Malawi 1855–1966* (Woodbridge, 2012).
[14] J.-B. Gewald, Marja Hinfelaar & Giacomo Macola (eds.), *One Zambia, Many Histories: towards a history of postcolonial Zambia* (Leiden, 2008); A. Johnston, *South Africa: inventing the nation* (London, 2014).
[15] Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855–1991* (Oxford, revised 2nd ed., 2001); T. Falola & M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge, 2008).
[16] E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983), 84–5.
[17] 'For the sins of Uganda I repent – Museveni', *New Vision* (Kampala), 18 October 2012.

composer of Uganda's national anthem in the early 1960s, as well as the others involved in the design of Uganda's national signs and symbols. Certainly, for a generation of late colonial activists who later formed postcolonial Uganda's first governing elite, the nation was real enough. Grace Ibingira, notably, wrote of the 'forging', and the 'evolution', of the Ugandan nation from the 1890s onwards in a full-length work of scholarly history in the early 1970s – though his vision was, not untypically, an increasingly disaffected one, reflected in his later novel about the travails of a 'fictional' African country.[18] Judging from his letter to the UN Secretary-General in 1966, *Kabaka* Edward Mutesa II was less sure of the viability of 'Uganda': traditional 'tribal' authority, it seemed, was more important than any chimeric visions of nationhood.[19] The further back we go into the colonial period, the more difficult the question becomes. At any rate, these unitary visions tended to be conceptualised as the products of a colonial modernity rather than rooted in the deeper past which was seen in more disconnected, fragmentary terms. Is it impossible, even undesirable, to think of Uganda as anything other than an empty receptacle into which are poured various ingredients, only to be emptied and refilled at regular intervals? Is Uganda merely – as one Ugandan informant once put it – the hardware, only lacking the appropriate software?[20]

Uganda is not *quite* as artificial as might be supposed – and certainly no more artificial than many others, whether in Africa, Europe or elsewhere.[21] It seems an apposite moment – following several decades of tumult and often rapid change across Africa in general, and certainly in Uganda in particular, and with a number of nations having now passed noteworthy jubilees – to consider the ways in which we might

[18] Grace Ibingira, *The Forging of an African Nation: the political and constitutional evolution of Uganda from colonial rule to independence, 1894–1962* (New York, 1973); and see his later *Bitter Harvest: a political novel* (Nairobi, 1980). Ibingira – involved in the design of Uganda's flag – was a leading figure in the UPC and served in Obote's government until his arrest in 1966. Released in 1971, he later went into self-imposed exile.

[19] 'Annexure to the Appeal by Kabaka Mutesa II to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, 11 March 1966', in D.A. Low (ed.), *The Mind of Buganda: documents of the modern history of an African kingdom* (London, 1971).

[20] Author's field notes and informal interviews, 6 August 2010.

[21] See, for example, A.D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford, 1999), 163; first published as 'Gastronomy or Geology? The role of nationalism in the reconstruction of nations', *Nations and Nationalism*, 1:1 (1995).

approach the history of an African nation. The foremost publisher in Uganda today, Fountain, was responsible for a brilliantly illustrated pictorial history of Uganda published in 2007.[22] One of the fascinating aspects of this book is that it was published to commemorate '150 years' of Uganda – and yet the selection of '1857' as a starting point is difficult to explain. It is not the accession of Mutesa I of Buganda, which took place around that time. However, it *does* appear to be rooted in the idea that Europeans first came to Uganda around this time, although it is a rather imprecise temporal hook on which to hang the argument: a man named Debono, a Maltese trader, was operating among the Acholi in the course of the 1850s, but Speke and Grant did not tread on 'Ugandan' soil until 1862, and Baker the following year. Whatever the case, the more important issue relates to the very legitimising presence of Europeans in the area – i.e., that 'Uganda begins' only when *bazungu* turn up to give it purpose, form and ultimately legality. This interpretation – privileging as it does the role of the exogenous – supposes that these are disparate peoples only brought together by the much more dynamic, historically meaningful, external forces that bring Africans into the world. In the process, these forces forge the place called 'Uganda', into which various peoples must squeeze themselves. It certainly raises an interesting question: *when* is Uganda? In one sense, perhaps, this is mere frippery: who cares when the place now called 'Uganda' comes into being, or that ultimately it appears to be foreigners who were responsible for it? On the other hand, it is vitally important, because it goes to the very heart of what an African 'nation' is – an externally created, artificial project which hapless natives must try in some way to make function, like a form of arranged marriage; or something rather more organic than that, with deeper historical roots, and linkages, and shared experiences, into which external influences become refracted, and co-opted. In truth, of course, 'foreigners' are usually involved in the making of nations, wherever we find them; and equally there is a level at which the national community only makes sense in contrast to others, to outsiders, to a line of vision which is by definition exogenous.

In wrestling with the question of when does one 'begin' a history of Uganda, I echo Karugire's argument that this is about 'shared historical experience' in the deeper past, not just since the late nineteenth

[22] *Uganda: a picture history, 1857–2007* (Kampala, 2007).

century.[23] It is not obvious why *la longue durée* should be any more problematic in Uganda than elsewhere in the world.[24] Uganda can be interpreted as an economic, political and cultural 'community', or 'zone', which in fact has a degree of cohesion and interconnection in the deeper past. In other words, there is a precolonial crucible that becomes Uganda, a zone of interconnectedness in which the seeds of 'Uganda' are sown. The notion of a supposedly debilitating 'artificiality' arose around the time of decolonisation and its immediate aftermath, when it seemed that the borders of Uganda – and many other 'new' African nations – now encompassed a range of groups with apparently little or nothing in common and no experience of working together in the name of a larger national entity which bore little resemblance to political realities on the ground.[25] It swiftly became clear that competition at the centre (and indeed at the edges) was over who would control this newly and externally defined space, inherited from colonial administrations. No doubt, enclosure potentially limited flexibility and placed restrictions on the earlier options of either violent confrontation or migration (although the story of Uganda contains plenty of both, in fact). Rather than having their conflicts played out through a multitude of channels and within a range of spaces, the newly anointed subjects/citizens of Uganda now had just one arena: that of the unitary state. Yet much was carried forward from the precolonial era within and around that 'artificial' space. Certainly, it should come as little surprise that enclosure brought about heightened levels of violence in postcolonial Uganda. This was the result, essentially, of what might be termed political claustrophobia. A political culture built around the notion that 'winner takes all' quickly developed within the confined space that was the nation-state, and panic – manifest in extraordinary brutality towards, and between, citizens – became part of that political culture. The regime of Idi Amin perhaps best demonstrates

[23] S. Karugire, *A Political History of Uganda* (Nairobi, 1980), 1–2.
[24] See Jeremy Black, *Contesting History: narratives of public history* (London, 2014).
[25] Contemporary analysis is provided in Thomas Hodgkin's classic *Nationalism in Colonial Africa* (London, 1956), and the core themes were subsequently developed in the work of, among many others, James Smoot Coleman – see *Nationalism and Development in Africa: selected essays* (Berkeley CA, 1994) – and Basil Davidson, whose thinking culminated in *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the curse of the nation-state* (London, 1992).

this. Yet while in some respects precolonial mechanisms for conflict resolution were undermined, much of the violence itself was actually precolonial in origin – most obviously that involving the hegemonic southern kingdoms, especially Buganda. Cultures of violence and militarism long pre-dated the formal creation of 'Uganda', and the fault lines which opened up in the years following Uganda's independence in 1962 were in fact of considerable antiquity. And so, too, were the histories of cultural interchange and reciprocal inspiration, and the economic networks which bound together diverse communities to mutual advantage. If war was old, then socio-economic connectivity was just as deep-rooted.

Terrain has *longue durée*, too, as Braudel argued,[26] and it is perhaps the easier of the tasks before us to define Uganda in terms of its physical geography. Broadly, the territory itself is plateau land, enclosed by a rim of mountains on its western and eastern flanks, and its general elevation rendering it relatively more temperate in climate than much of the surrounding region, despite the fact that it straddles the equator.[27] Uganda lies almost completely within the Nile basin, and around 16 per cent of its total area is open water and swampland, including the major lakes Victoria, Albert, Edward and Kyoga which ring the relatively better-watered southern half of the territory. The White Nile, indeed, in many ways defines and cuts across the territory, flowing out of Lake Victoria at Jinja, intersecting with the western end of Lake Kyoga before moving into Lake Albert, from whence it flows northward out of Uganda and into South Sudan. The southern half of Uganda experiences heavier rainfall, with two main rainy seasons between March and June and between September and November, and this – combined with the prevalence of lakes and waterways – means that southern Uganda has the heavier vegetation, including savannah grasslands and some equatorial forest, and much richer soils. Thus the south has historically been able to support extensive farming and sizeable population densities. In the north, by contrast, rainfall is much lower, and certainly less bimodal: the hot, arid northeast, notably,

[26] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1994; 1st pub., 1949).

[27] For more detailed overviews of Uganda's physicality, see Thomas & Scott, *Uganda*, Chapters 2 & 3; and in a regional context, S.J.K. Baker, 'The East African environment', in R. Oliver & G. Mathew (eds.), *History of East Africa* vol. I (Oxford, 1963).

experiences only one annual rainy season (March–April). Northern Uganda has much thinner vegetation, and in the dry plains in the north-central and northeast zones, pastoralism is predominant. Of course even within these broad areas, there is considerable – even dramatic – variation, meaning that despite Uganda's relatively compact size it encompasses extraordinary environmental and climatic diversity: the highland regions of the Ruwenzori mountains of the southwest, a political and cultural frontier land of historical significance, on the upper reaches of which there is a permanent layer of snow, and high rainfall and lower temperatures on the lower hills; the remarkable sub-snowline landscapes of Mt. Elgon in the east; the dry grasslands of Ankole and the Masaka area, characterised by undulating hills and relatively low rainfall; the moist northern and western strip around Lake Victoria with forest (including the Mabira belt) stretching from Jinja to the Kagera River; the hot and dry Karamoja area in the northeast. The general pattern for the rest of Uganda, however, is plateau land covered by tree savannah, enjoying sufficient rainfall for settled agriculture. Again farming – and, of course, fishing, one of the oldest economic activities in the area – has been greatly assisted by the omnipresence of lakes and rivers. With the exception of the Nile itself, and the clear streams found in the mountainous areas and on the slopes of the western rift valley, rivers are mostly sluggish swamps, such as the Kafu, Katonga, Sezibwa and Mpologoma.

Communities moved into and adapted their economies to particular environments, often nestling alongside rivers and streams or hugging lake shores. At this point, it is important to emphasise the complexity of Uganda's human environment, no less than its physical composition. Defining and enumerating 'ethnic groups' in a rigid sense is dangerous and misleading,[28] but there are more than two dozen reasonably clearly defined and numerically significant ethnic groups in Uganda today, some of which spill over into the neighbouring

[28] There is a substantial literature on the supposed modern 'invention', and the 'reimagining', of ethnic identity, in Uganda as elsewhere: see, for example, Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven & London, 1994), 232–4; and Iliffe, *Modern History*, 323. Some, however, have argued for a more *longue durée* approach: notably J.-P. Chretien & G. Prunier (eds.), *Les ethnies ont une histoire* (Paris, 1989), P. Chabal and J.-P. Daloz, *Africa Works: disorder as political instrument* (Oxford, 1999), 57, T. Spear, 'Neo-traditionalism and the limits of invention in British colonial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 44:1 (2003).