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# The 50th Anniversary of Uganda's State Independence: A View from Society

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This is a time for anniversaries. This year, we have observed two anniversaries in the 50s this year: the anniversary to mark the ascension of H.H. the Aga Khan, and the independence of Uganda. I shall focus on the latter event in these remarks.

The 50th anniversary of Uganda, like that of all states in the region, was celebrated by one and all. The most striking thing about the celebration was the lack of any critical reflection. I would like to begin with a question

Whose 50th birthday did we celebrate on 9th October? Of the state or of society? Ugandan society is much older than the state. Its age would be measured in thousands of years, not a few decades. The main problem with the celebrations that took place was that we made no distinction between state and society. We all celebrated as if we were part of the state.

Of course, society should celebrate this anniversary. After all, 1962 marked Uganda's independence from foreign domination. But society also needs to reflect critically on the nature of the state we inherited at independence.

The state of Uganda was established as a colonial state, in early 20th century. It was born as a conquest state. The colonial state conquered society. In the years that followed independence, nationalist scholars set out to study this process at the economic level. Among the best known of the dependency scholars was Walter Rodney, who wrote *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Today we need to go beyond political economy to politics—beyond *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, to *How Europe Ruled Africa*.

Let me give you my main argument before I elaborate on it.

## The Modern State

The modern state was a product of developments in Europe, specifically 17th c Europe. By the modern state, we mean a state which has a monopoly over means of violence, a state which stands as master over society. The

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<sup>1</sup> Text of a talk delivered by Prof Mahmood Mamdani at a dinner to celebrate the 56th anniversary of Imam Day, Serena Hotel, 18th July, 2013

ideal relationship between state and society is one between a state that is fully militarized and a society that is fully demilitarized.

In the West, or in democratic societies, they say that this militarization has another side—this is democracy. Democracy ensures that all institutions of the state (the military, the police, the bureaucracy, and so on) operate under the direction of elected civilian leaders.

The current debate in the West about democracy is about how meaningful is this civilian control. Americans recall the warning of a former President, Dwight Eisenhower, of the threat of a military-industrial complex, and not elected leaders, ruling America. Those who elected Obama wonder how meaningful was their victory. The Second World War ended but the military machine developed to fight it was not dismantled. The Cold War ended but the military machine it justified was not dismantled.

Democracy as a relation between state and society defines is only one part of the story of the modern state in the West. The other part of this story concerns us directly, we the non-West where the military power of these states was unleashed, we the rest of the world where there was no democracy.

This brings me home, to Uganda.

## State and Society in Uganda

The relation between state and society changed radically with colonialism. Before colonialism, society was strong enough to rule itself. What we call modern law, and know as part of the modern state, was then a part of society. The main difference between customary law and modern law is this: customary law is a set of rules and conventions through which pre-modern society regulated itself; modern law is a set of rules through which the state regulates society. Unlike with customary law, the enforcement of modern law is backed by the power of the state. The strength of society before colonialism lay in its capacity for self-regulation.

With colonialism began a sustained assault on the capacity of society to regulate itself. Not only the colonial period but this entire century should be seen as a period of conquest, of state conquering society. This conquest was not a one off development, but a process. This process, this conquest, is still continuing.

If you think back of the last five decades of Uganda's state independence, you will realize that the relation between State and Society has been mediated through ongoing violence. No matter the government in power, the Ugandan state has confronted society, different parts of society, as

so many challenges to be vanquished by force. Think of the big questions in Uganda's independence history: the Buganda Question: the Northern Question, the Karamoja Question, the Asian Question. Each of these has been 'resolved' through violence at some point in our history. And each resolution has proved unsatisfactory and thus temporary, calling for more violence.

## The Buganda Question

It is well known that the conquest of Buganda was a product of religious wars -war between three different factions (Ba-Ingeleza, Ba-Fransa and Ba-Islamu) and the subordination of a fourth, comprising those owing allegiance to an indigenous spiritual and political tradition. For those interested in this historical period, I suggest you read my friend Lwanga Lunyiigo's recently published biography of Kabaka Mwanga.

This power grab marks the onset of a tradition of violent expropriation and expulsion. Catholics were forcibly removed from Mengo and resettled around Masaka. Peasants lost their land, as did clans, and were forced to line up behind the new Ba-Ingeleza chiefs, backed by the power of the British colonial state. The only way for these expropriated peasants to get access to land was to follow these chiefs to new counties and sub-counties to start their lives afresh.

Anyone interested in the history of ethnic cleansing in Uganda would do well to note this salient historical fact: The first 'ethnic cleansing' in the history of Uganda happened in Buganda. Though British scholars like Low sanctified it as a 'revolution,' we need to see through this official history.

## The Northern Question

The North-South division in Uganda is a political division between two sides of the Nile. The North lies east of the Nile, and the South to its West. The North was developed as a labor reserve area and the South as a commodity reserve area. When the colonial state taxed northern peasants, the only way they could get regular access to cash was to move south and work for a wage, in plantations or coffee farms, or the police or the army. In contrast, peasants in the South were encouraged to grow cash crops, cotton, coffee, and so on, to get money to pay tax and buy necessities like salt, medicine or the hoe.

As a result, every institution of the state developed an ethnic and a regional flavor. The army, like the police, was northern. The bureaucracy

was southern. The merchant class was Asian, and so on. The very organization of state institutions set up one part of society in opposition to the rest.

Over time, two major fissures developed in Ugandan society: on the one hand, a division between the North and the South; on the other, a tension between Africans and Asians.

Both questions have been resolved through violence, and neither question seems to go away.

The relation between the political North and the political South has moved in a see-saw fashion. It took the British longer to conquer the North than the South, because in the North they had to subdue entire societies and not just the political leadership of crystallized kingdoms.

Once colonial rule stabilized, the center of gravity of active opposition to it shifted from the North to the South, which was the home of the cotton and coffee economy. Faced with peasant uprisings and worker strikes in 1945 and 1949, the colonial power used armed forces recruited in the North to suppress popular resistance movements in the South.

In independent Uganda, this same division continued until the NRA defeated the Obote II and the Okello regimes and created its own army. To understand what followed, I suggest you read the book by Adam Branch, my colleague at Makerere Institute of Social Research.

The North has been the site of an ongoing military campaign since 1986. The real cost of this armed confrontation has been paid by the civilian population, not by the armed groups on both sides. The LRA kidnapped and forcibly conscripted children; as a consequence, the LRA turned into an armed force comprised mainly of forcibly recruited and armed victims.

On its part, the government decided to fight the LRA by punishing the civilian population. Starting in the mid-90s, it forcibly interned roughly 90% of the population of Acholi districts behind in camps around the country. It was a counter-insurgency strategy that the British had perfected earlier during the Boer War in South Africa and the Mau Mau uprising in Nairobi, and the Americans had emulated in South Vietnam.

## The Asian Question

The Asian Question reached its most explosive point under Idi Amin, but it was not manufactured by Amin. Amin reduced the Asian question to a simplicity. Asians, said Amin, are all exploiters: "They milked the cow but did not feed it."

Today, the Asian Question has been reduced to another simplicity: Asians, says the NRM, are investors. So what about those like me who work

for a living, who are neither exploiters nor investors? In the language of officialdom, we cease to exist. Linguists call this rhetorical violence.

Official rhetoric has a resonance in the society at large. Popular usage makes no distinction between a 3rd generation East African like myself, or someone who stepped off the plane yesterday. Both are known as a *Bahindi*. To be a Muhindi is to be a permanent visitor. It is to be known by your ancestral origin, not by your present, nor by the future you hope to build. To be a permanent visitor is, however, to be permanently insecure and permanently irresponsible. If the Asian minority is daily plagued by this insecurity, the majority is forever conscious of Asian Ugandans as irresponsible to society.

People of Africa who migrate to USA, whether as forced immigrants in the past or voluntarily as now, are called African-Americans. Africans who move to Britain are called Black British. The left side of the hyphen tells you where they came from, the right side highlights where they are. From this point of view, Ugandans of South Asian origin should be called Asian Ugandans, or Asian Africans.

## The Ugandan Question

My larger point is this. Uganda's contemporary politics is a bundle of questions: the Buganda Question, the Northern Question, the Karimojong Question, and the Asian Question. None of these should be seen as a special question, isolated from the rest. Each is part of a larger problem that plagues all Ugandans. We are trapped in a state culture of violence. This culture is both a hallmark of state practices and is perpetuated by it. Our challenge is to find an effective anti-dote to it.

To do so, I suggest we think from the standpoint of society, not the state. Conventional wisdom in Uganda holds that whoever controls means of violence controls society. The most important criterion of rule, it is believed, is access to violence.

When political science students learn Western political theory at Makerere University, they learn it as a linear tradition, from Machievelli to Hobbes to Hegel to Weber to Huntington. The lesson is repeated over and again: that power is about control of the state and the state is an apparatus with the monopoly of violence.

But even in Western theory, there is a counter tradition, a tradition that begins with the Greeks, with Aristotle, and comes to full flowering with anti-Nazi German philosophers, Hannah Arendt and the theorists of civil society, those who argued that political community is not based on

violence but on consent. Even conquest is not durable if not translated into consent.

There are several democratic traditions, not just one. I suggest that we think of democracy not just as a state practice, but as a societal practice, as a way society organizes its internal affairs. From this point view, we should consider Uganda's pre-colonial history as a treasure chest that can be mined, not so that we identify practices and apply these mechanically, but so that we may adapt these selectively and creatively.

## Democracy as a Social Practice

Democracy as a state practice has a shallow history in Uganda. It was totally absent before colonialism and in the colonial period. After independence, state democracy has been an irregular practice.

Democracy as a societal practice has a rich and long tradition, starting with the village assembly, what the Waswahili call the *Baraza*. I recall an essay we published in *Mawazo* in the 1980s by the Congolese historian Wamba-dia-Wamba. It focused on the *palaver*—broad discussion—as a way to achieve agreement, consensus and community, as a practice that predated colonialism.

It has some resemblance with our system of local councils. This institution originated in the Luwero Triangle during the guerrilla struggle. When in the bush, the NRM replaced government chiefs with popular councils and committees, called RCS.

When they came to power, and instituted a local government commission that deliberated on the future of this practice, there began a great debate: Should RCS be autonomous organizations of the people? Should they be organs of the state, with oversight from the Ministry of Local Government? Or should they be organs subordinate to the NRM headquarters? Today, the LCS, in particular LCIS, have withered. There is little evidence that the LCS retain any of the autonomy that marked the old RCS.

The great challenge of social activists is to get those who have a monopoly on arms to see a simple truth: that arms are a very poor guarantee to a secure future.

The South African whites have been the latest to learn this lesson. They used to think that, as a minority, they would not survive democracy without a monopoly of arms and a monopoly over political representation. Forced to give up that monopoly in 1994, they feel even more secure as part of a larger democracy. Today, the Boers of South Africa wonder why they did not learn this lesson earlier.

To return to the event that we have gathered to celebrate, the 56th anniversary to mark Imamat Day, I suggest we reflect on a single fact. The Aga Khan has millions of followers, but he has no army. The Pope has hundreds of millions of followers, but he too has no army.

The most durable human societies are built on the basis of consent, not conquest. It is not the capacity for violence and coercion that distinguishes us from animals. What is most human about us is the gift of speech, and the ability to persuade fellow humans. Let us build on that.

Thank You!