

Riot Making in Makerere: Aesthetics and Policy in Media Representation of Makerere Strikes in October 2014

I.

Eddie Sejjoba's photograph published in the weekly newspaper, *The Saturday Vision*, on 25th October 2014 depicts rioters at Makerere University on top of a police pickup, and a larger crowd of heads, umbrellas, tree branches and raised sticks. This photograph is perhaps not simply an image report but it relays the visual aspects of rioting in the institution's campus. The objects that form the image of the riot: the red undergraduate gown, raised sticks, vuvuzelas, and tree branches, are, also, ways in which rioters identify themselves. A group of rioters collects on an immobilized police pickup, previously launched onto the campus to disperse the protest. Yet the scene, now, resembles an assembly, or perhaps a stadium sized prayer crusade. This is an excited crowd. The male figures splayed across the image handling sticks bring to mind known representations of violence in Uganda's history. Such as depicted scenes of violent upheaval, on the events of 1885, in which dogs, or the royal pages attack the Christian pupils. The red-robed male figures on top of the pickup face away from Sejjoba's camera. These are, if not simply image reports, religious images. The image of the red-robed male speakers addressing their excited crowd is simultaneously an image of a prophet addressing his followers. Certainly, the object of absolution is this red colored gown. If one would take such an interpretation, the images depict the male figures as having attained a spiritual presence before the attentive crowds. The figures of red-robed students are delivering a speech, and the crowd is braving the rain. The location is a field of green grass and trees on the university's campus. Around the speech and its interlocutors, green enhances the reds that occupy the image signaling either blood, or sacredness. Not only do the subjects in the image appear engaged in a sacred event, the viewer of the photograph is arrested by the scene. The perspective of the photographer is one of reverence and adoration. The photographer, Eddie Sejjoba, is among the throng, watching at a distance, with admiration. There is a sense that the photographer is also engaged as an interlocutor. I choose the photograph

because it complicates the simplistic image of unruly, and more exactly, uncivilized students rioting on the campus as the newspaper headlines depict. There is a sense of order, that, in the photographer's perspective, equals something of a gathering in political terms: an election rally, or in religious terms: a prayer crusade. The image poses a problem for the institution of police, as well as challenging the Public Order Management Act that is millennial policy. However, photographer Sejjoba produces a second image published in the daily New Vision on Tuesday, the 21st of October, that is similar in composition to the one of the speech (no doubt taken on the same day) but one which has riot police on top of the pick up instead, and strangely places in the middle of the car a photographer pointing his lens straight at the camera, as though Sejjoba were a classical realist painter with his own intentions. While the riot police atop pickup illustrates the headline: 'Police quell Makerere riot', and justifies Ugandan law, the mysterious photographer in the shot is out of place. What is a photographer doing standing on top of the pickup? What does this position signify in the narrative of the institution and its subjects?

II.

The headline of 'Police quell Makerere riot' of Tuesday, October 21st in the daily New Vision leads an image of Sejjoba's that is very similar to the one of the speech. In this photograph, it is police men who stand on the top of the police pickup, looking down at students. There is a sense that the crowd is as large as the one in the speech shot. However, it looks scantier than the one in the speech photograph. In this one the majority of the color is from the blue army uniform, and plastic helmets, strengthened by the blue of the police pickup. The reds are mostly at the bottom of the image and are not the focal point of the photograph. The photograph is a contradiction in and of itself. As an image of the strikes in Makerere, it does not really give the actual rioters any precedence. Instead, the headline above the photograph and its caption (Makerere University students engage the Police during yesterday's strike) offer a number of falsifications. There is a rhetorical inaccuracy between the text in the

headline and that in the caption. What is the position of the police, and what is the position of the students? Visually, the inverted nature of this meeting, this encounter between police and the students does not suggest or imply that the police are on level ground with the students. It does not indicate that the students are interlocutors in this encounter. If we could take this as a signifier of power, then the topography of the image, where police are safely placed above the students on a pickup truck, and the students dotted in the field below at the margins of the photograph, paints an act of domination. This is a direct reference to what Edward Said refers to as political society, as one whose institutions function through domination and not consent. If we can think about the subjects in question, they are visually dominated by the institution of police. The headline itself reveals this. Police quell Makerere riot. The New Vision's vocabulary or choice of words, does not help in this case, because 'quell' comes from the German word for torture. The inherent violence signified in the text and in the image points towards the institution, and its methodologies of domination. Likewise, the representation of the rioters, both in the text, and in the image reduces them to troublemaking subjects, a point which is entirely contradictory when viewing the image of the speech. There, the subjects are in a stadium-size evangelical meeting. The inversion of the figures, I feel, is strange and sequential. The image of the riot police on top of the pick up can be said to come before the image of the speech by rioters. Visually, this turn of events in the camera's lens forms a change in the narrative preferred by the New Vision newspaper. The meanings of political organization in one image change in another. The image presents an interesting inversion, where the criminalized take on the riot police vehicle, consuming its power. However are these named criminals, not simply university students striking against their school administration? Is there not, also, a confusion in this image regarding the dangerousness of the students as well as their political affiliations, or political position?

The text report written by Clara Muhindo and Andrew Senyonga accompanying Sejjoba's image of riot police on top of the pickup, and published on the 21st of October in the daily New Vision, states that while the students demanded the Vice-Chancellor to address them over the increment in graduation fees, police moved in to disperse them using teargas, and rubber bullets. While the students are being referred to as angry which has led them to pick up sticks and to march to the vice chancellor's office, they have been referred to as rioters within the headline which says 'Police quells Makerere riot'. A riot is a violent public disturbance, a definition of a gathering which is criminal under Uganda's Public Order Mgt. Act. On the other hand, a strike is 'a refusal to work organized by a body of employees as a form of protest, typically in an attempt to gain a concession from their employer.' I would argue that what happened in the week of 20th October 2014 is that the Makerere students organized a strike by refusing to study and assembling in front of the administration building, demanding a concession from the vice chancellor. I would think of them as organizing a strike. As I already mentioned, there are several inaccuracies and perhaps even fallacies in the media's reports on this strike. Various attempts, though implicit, are made to show the police as interlocutors in the strike: to show them as correspondents, perhaps between the students and the body of the institution. This manifests itself in the Oneal photograph of a smiling police chief, Afande Kale Kayihura, published sequentially on the Thursday following, with one of the stories titled: Police apologizes for teargas. However, this image and text contradict the overpowering headline, 'Police quells Makerere riot,' along with the report that says "police moved in to disperse them using teargas and rubber bullets" shows the police to be functioning within Ugandan law. Both the Police Act and the Public Order Management act, enlist the "regulation" of public meetings. Public meeting is defined in the law as a 'gathering, assembly, procession or demonstration in a public place or premises held for the purposes of discussing, acting upon, petitioning or expressing views on a matter of public interest.' And while the law exempts the meeting of a trade union, or for religious, or educational purposes, it does not state that students within the sphere of an education institution can be protected

from such a law that human rights advocates have defined as an anti-protest law. There is so much failure on the part of the law to distinguish between students who are under an institution of education, and a group of unlawful protesters in the public domain. The question of whether a university can protect its students from the Public Order Mgt. Act and Police Act is pertinent. What protects a student who gathers on university campus with the intention to address the university Vice Chancellor from being a criminal? Furthermore, what are the instruments of punishment that the police uses? In my research on punishment, I find little to nothing available on punishment outside of the model of the prison. And yet, teargas, and rubber bullets, are indeed a form of policing, if not, a form of punishment. The Public Order Mgt. Act does give the right to an authorized police officer to detain persons involved in an unlawful public meeting if they fail to produce the police notice of the meeting, without public hearing. Contradictorily, the newspapers reported that six were arrested and that they were all released following the arrest. So, it is insufficient to think of punishment or penalty for strictly in the sense of detainment or imprisonment. The nature of recent political history in which Uganda continues to exist in a postwar psychological situation contributes quite considerably to the ideas of what is referred to as criminal; as well as who is referred to as a criminal. The contradictions within the reports show that indeed in this immediately postwar period, even a group of students in a public gathering within the confines of a university can be regarded as political terrorists. This situation speaks on the inconsistency of Ugandan law: its criminalizing students inside the walls of a public institution.

IV

The smile of the police chief in the Nicholas Oneal photograph, published on Thursday 23rd October in the daily New Vision, does not belong to one interested in punishing students for gathering publicly to protest against a fee increment. The atmosphere in the Oneal photograph is jovial, published only two days after the police 'quelled' the riot. The police chief Kale Kayihura is in the foreground, and beside him is riot police staring intently into the camera with somewhat serious looking faces. The

students in the background are waving their hands, perhaps pointing towards the riot police, which has now been condemned as the Kampala Metropolitan Police boss has apologized for his failure to stop his officers from using teargas on the students gathering. The riot police in blue, in fact, does not look happy as they stare into the camera. Visible is the distance between the Police chief Kale Kayihura, and these riot police officers. His smile is contradictory to their grimaces. The photograph by ONeal is somewhat different in its scope to the work of Emmanuel Sejjoba because of his preferred use of a close-up lens that makes the landscape abstract while exaggerating the expressions of the subjects in the foreground. In this way, one merely sees the university senate building as a cloud with blue dots. And because the image is shot with this perspective, the viewer is incapable of viewing the rest of the figures in the photograph behind the police boss beside the immediately excited students contrasted with the gloomy riot police. Was this the only reaction to the police apology? Was it only one of ululation? Perhaps does this image really mean that the students got what they wanted out of the protest? Was the fee increment removed? I find the photograph somewhat disturbing because of its implications. The full event of protest happened in many ways without the actual institution of education. The police boss' smile positions the students as outsiders from the institution, and makes them into the uncouth protesters on the street that the law seeks to criminalize. The lack of a faculty member or educational board member within the photograph, and the reproduction of quotes from the president of Uganda makes the image not only symbolic but loaded with meaning. The interpretation of an "order from above" is evident immediately in the smile of the police boss and the grimacing of the riot police. It can be contextualized within the body politic of Foucault. Representing a figure subjected to punishment marked by a 'lack of power', Foucault says that in the darkest region of the political field the condemned man represents the symmetrical inverted figure of the king. The smile of the police chief with the uncouth protesters enjoining in the background is part of an iconography of state power. The irony is within the image itself, the celebrating students are not celebrating for their own cause, but rather cheering on the "order from above" as it were, according the image. None

of the students, in fact, in the image are represented with the red undergraduate gown that has come to identify the student protest and its causes. These rioters are unclothed and hence visually marked with a 'lack of power'. Lastly, this smile from the police chief gives the untoward illusion that power has been transferred.