

Amii Omara-Otunnu, **Politics and the Military in Uganda 1890-1985**, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1987. 218 pp. No price.

At first glance, this book appears to be a valuable addition to the study of modern African history. Foreign media have consistently distorted the complex history of Uganda, sensationalizing the brutal antics of Idi Amin and his successors in order to proclaim the enduring nature of African barbarism. So it is with particular pleasure and interest that we read a Ugandan scholar's version of recent events in his country, written in the form of a comprehensive account of the history of military/civil relations in Uganda from the beginning of colonial rule up to the present day.

Unfortunately Dr. Otunnu fails to fulfill this promise. The author writes extremely well, but beneath the prose lie some serious flaws. Indeed, close reading reveals not scholarly analysis but a partisan revision of Ugandan history, designed to legitimize the Okello regime in particular, and military rule in general.

The author has all the appearance of a highly qualified academic. According to the book jacket, he studied at the University of London, took his doctorate at Oxford, and currently holds the position of Visiting Scholar at Harvard. Yet the quality of his research is well below normal academic standards, especially for a work of such ambitious scope. No references at all are made to the vast literature on modernization, underdevelopment, or class conflict in the Third World. Also absent are important works on Ugandan history and politics from both the left and the right, by such noted authors as Karugire, Mamdani, Mazrui, Jorgenson, Gertzel, and Ibingira. Granted, originality needs no footnote. One does not ask a Cabral or a Fanon for a bibliography. But Dr. Otunnu's book is not a memoir or a theoretical essay; it is an attempt to survey more than a century of Ugandan history. To succeed, such an attempt must rely on research done by other scholars. The fact that Otunnu does not acknowledge or investigate the work of a significant number of those who have gone before him weakens the credibility of the entire project.

More significantly, the level of analysis is disappointingly superficial. From the storming of the Kabaka's palace in 1966 to the NRA's victory in 1986, armed force has been the dominant force in national life, causing untold amounts of bloodshed and destruction. Otunnu addresses this issue by coining a rather original phrase, the "familiarity syndrome". He argues that after independence there was a subtle transformation in the way African soldiers perceived those in authority. Under British rule, African soldiers did not challenge the

colonial government because they held the British in awe as "aliens and superiors", whereas after independence the soldiers had the confidence to intervene in political affairs and overthrow the government because they had "personal knowledge" of their leaders. Otunnu calls this change in outlook the "familiarity syndrome" and advances it as one of the prime causes of political instability in modern Uganda, if not the whole of Africa.

Though this theory has some merit, it places too much emphasis on subjective factors. Otunnu does not convincingly demonstrate why "familiarity" should be given more emphasis than other factors, such as corruption in senior ranks or the growth of paramilitary organizations. Second, by putting all the emphasis on the attitudes of the soldiers, he underestimates the role played by civilian leaders in politicizing the armed forces. Third, he fails to analyze the relationship between the military and Ugandan society as a whole. The "familiarity syndrome" is an intriguing idea, but it will make little contribution to our understanding of political instability and military rule until it is integrated into a broader analysis of social and economic change.

What I find most interesting about this theory, however, is its conceptual underpinnings. Like many scholars, Dr. Otunnu interprets African history in terms of before and after independence, and bases his whole analysis on a supposed contrast between colonial and post-colonial eras. In one sense this is a step forward, in that he has at least set events into a historical context. But in a deeper sense, this kind of interpretation perpetuates colonial standards of historiography. First, it reinforces the racist idea that African history begins with colonialism, when in actual fact European rule was but a nasty, brutish and short interlude in the long history of African civilization. Second, Uganda has entered a dynamic new stage in its history that must be understood on its own terms. In the twenty years since independence, the emergence of new classes and new forms of international conflict have transformed Ugandan society in ways that cannot be incorporated lock, stock and barrel into neo-colonial paradigms. Third, notwithstanding the very real and important contrast between colonial rule and independence, there are fundamental continuities between the two periods. As Dr. Otunnu himself points out, the Ugandan army was trained and prepared not for defense against external enemies, but for the repression of resistance to colonial rule. This inward orientation continues into the present era, setting the precedent for military intervention into politics. Indeed, it is a misnomer to speak of the military "intervening" in politics. It would be more accurate to think of the military and the politicians as two wings of a single state apparatus,

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whose primary purpose in both colonial and post-colonial periods has been to subjugate and exploit the people of Uganda.

Yet to argue about the theoretical validity of the author's familiarity doctrine misses the point. After the first few chapters the author sets his theory aside and concentrates instead on narrating the flow of events from independence up to 1985. It gradually becomes clear that his purpose is not to analyze these events or explain their causes, but to give a general history of modern Uganda. And this general history is not written to inform the reader, but rather to present a version of events that will legitimize the administration that was in power at the time this book was written, the Military Council led by general Tito Okello. Thus the author would have us believe that Okello removed Obote from power due to a "moral obligation to prevent further bloodshed" and a "laudable desire to bring about peace and reconciliation", and would have succeeded if it had not been for the "intransigence" and "tribalistic appeal" of the NRA, the guerrilla movement led by Yoweri Museveni.

We do not have the space here to go into the internal dynamics of the NRA or the Okello regime.¹ What needs to be emphasized here is that the one factor that set the NRA apart from all other political groups in Uganda, including the short-lived Okello regime, is that its strength never depended on access to the resources of the state. As a guerrilla movement, the NRA could only achieve success through the mobilization of popular support in the countryside. This is the factor that explains the remarkable discipline of the NRA, confirmed by every observer, but explained away by Dr. Otunnu as no more than an effective public relations exercise. Without question, ethnicity and personal ambition accounted for much of the NRA's appeal, but for Dr. Otunnu to assert that the NRA is based on tribalism is both hypocritical and inaccurate. By falling victim to such errors, Dr. Otunnu serves those foreign interests who have no wish to see Uganda develop. The publication of this book will only serve as one more attempt to discredit progressive nationalism in the Third World.

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¹ We refer interested readers to Ufahamu 15/3 (Spring 1987), which carried a number of articles on the current situation.