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INTRODUCTION

I first saw Idi Amin in 1972, after I returned home to Kampala from the United States to begin research on my doctoral thesis. Ali Mazrui, the head of the Political Science Department at Kampala's Makerere University, had suggested I join the department as a teaching assistant, which I was delighted to do. That same year, Amin came to Makerere to preside over the university's fiftieth anniversary celebrations. From the moment he arrived, Amin was the center of attention. As he took the podium, Amin's remarks had the effect of a tremor: "I came here with a battalion of soldiers so that when you lift your heads from books, you know who has power." We were stunned. Then came an even more outrageous statement: "On my way to the main hall, I stopped at Mulago (the university hospital). I looked at your records. I see that most of you are suffering from gonorrhoea. I will not tolerate you spreading political gonorrhoea in Uganda." This was my introduction to Amin's many uses of public buffoonery as political performance.

A year later, I joined the University of Dar es Salaam as a young lecturer. There, I met Yoweri Museveni who had graduated from the university and taken a job as an instructor at the Cooperative College in Moshi, Tanzania. I had heard of him as the charismatic head of the University Students' African Revolutionary Front (USARF) at the University of Dar es Salaam. Perched on a hill several miles from the city center, the university campus was generally known as "The Hill." Never a shortage of anecdotal stories when it came to Museveni, one went like this. In the week after Mao's death, Museveni was teaching at the

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Cooperative College. Before class began, he walked to the blackboard and wrote something like,

Marx was a great man. Marx is dead.
Lenin was a great man. Lenin is dead.
Mao was a great man. Mao too is dead.
I, too, am not feeling so well . . .

There was little reason to think of Museveni as modest.

Like other subjects in the colony, both Amin and Museveni were products of British colonialism in at least one sense: they were both publicly identified as members of a race or a tribe. And so was I. The British were master classifiers. They understood that to be modern was to be master of all; the power to define would lead the way to other powers, to arrange and rearrange everything, in nature and in society. This hubris would ultimately lead the British to cleanse and reorder areas of the world as part of a larger effort to remake the world as a whole. Not surprisingly, their first act after conquest was to classify all plants and animals. Humans, too, were classified, into natives and non-natives. Non-natives like myself (I was of South Asian descent) were persons of no fixed abode. In contrast, natives, like Amin and Museveni, were defined by place. Classified into a variety of species, each belonged to a “tribe” with a designated territory (“tribal homeland”), under charge of a single “traditional authority.” The “tribe” was different from the precolonial “ethnic group” in two ways. First, it was identified with a fixed territory and, second, every tribe had a hierarchical authority with the right to mete corporal punishment to native subjects as the exercise of a “customary” right. The person in charge of maintaining order and gathering taxes in this territory was known as the tribal chief, as distinct from the clan head. By fixing cultural identity to a territorial space, colonialism politicized culture as “tribe” and organized it under a single traditional authority. By the time of Uganda’s independence in 1962, the colony represented a patchwork of tribes.

The colonial economy that Britain created was powered by migrant labor. In Uganda, migrant workers came from across several borders, including Rwanda, Sudan, and Kenya, and small traders came from the older British colony of India. Having brought these migrants to Uganda without any restriction on the du-

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ration of their stay, the colonial authority at the same time barred them from owning land in their new home. The prohibition on owning land was extended to denial of birthright citizenship at independence. As part of the preparation for independence, Britain finalized a list of “indigenous tribes” (communities) in the colony so as to leave no doubt as to who was considered officially “indigenous” and who was not. The constitution at independence (that is, the 1962 Constitution) reserved citizenship by birth to members of “indigenous tribes” in the country. The first government, led by Milton Obote, the then-prime minister and second president of Uganda, followed Britain’s lead when it expelled all Luo persons living within the country as indigenous—regardless of how many years they had lived there. The distinction between “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” became critical when it came to staffing the modern sector emerging in the colonial period—the army, the police, large-scale trade. The power to define and distinguish the “indigenous” from those not was the *first* lever of power wielded by postindependence governments. It was at the heart of the politics of “tribalism.” Though invented by Britain, we shall see that none perfected it as did Museveni. As part of an attempt to stabilize his rule and vanquish all opposition, Museveni subdivided existing districts into many, doubling, tripling, and even quadrupling the number of districts. Now, each district had its “native” tribes (sometimes more than one) alongside “non-native” or settler tribes. Continuous fragmentation of the subject population, an ongoing and seemingly endless process, reinforced by official violence and institutionalized corruption—that is, different ways of disciplining resisters and rewarding collaborators—is what I call “slow poison.”

A decade after independence, in 1971, Amin became president in an orgy of violence, wielding one part of the colonial army as a hammer against the part that remained loyal to the ousted Obote government. The colonial army had been recruited from groups marginal to the country’s administration and the economy and was marked by two features. First, the army came mostly from the area north of the Nile River, which gave it a regional character. Cash crop-producing peasants south of the Nile River were carefully kept out of the army, even though they had a long tradition of participating in military service in different centralized kingdoms of the south. The reason was simple: after all, the army was likely to be used against them. Second, the colonial army was recruited from particular ethnic groups. The mixing of persons from different “tribes” was

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discouraged. Britain tagged the administrative units from which they drew soldiers and police as “martial tribes.” Company solidarity and spirit was hailed as tribal solidarity, a form of patriotism befitting natives.

The politicians, too, represented different “tribal homelands.” So, when the coup took place in 1971, everyone knew which side they were on. In the colonial world, there had been little freedom. As with ethnic and religious identity, so with politics, your side was assigned to you at birth. At the time of the Amin coup, the “northerners” were on one side, and those from the Northwest—including the Nubi, a group whose members possessed a hyphenated identity, one part ethnic, the other linguistic (more on this later)—were on the other side. Though a minority in the army, Amin’s group won because they enjoyed predominant support from the civilian majority in the south, where the capital was located, and from key outside powers, Britain and Israel.

Foreign advisors disagreed on the course the coup makers should pursue: the British argued for a straightforward assassination of Milton Obote; the Israelis said it would only serve to warn the president’s tribal support in the army, and thus was likely to be counterproductive. They proposed to begin the coup by neutralizing Obote’s supporters in the army. That led to massive violence in the barracks.

The first wave of violence was the largest: Amin’s group, which carried out the coup of 1971, annihilated large sections of the army. Many who survived either left with Obote, the ousted president, or followed him, to Tanzania or Sudan. The army would continue to be a collection of glorified tribal militias, drawing its personnel, particularly its leadership, from two regions: West Nile, Amin’s home region; and South Sudan. South Sudanese soldiers (the Anyanya) were incorporated into Amin’s army following the 1972 Addis Ababa peace accords that brought the civil war in Sudan to an end.

The tribal nature of the army persisted, both with the government army in Uganda and the rebel armies in Tanzania. After the fall of the Amin regime in 1979, two armed tribal militias, one led by Obote (Kikosi Maalum) and the other by Museveni (Front for National Salvation, FRONASA), would confront one another, the former drawing its soldiers mainly from “the North,” the latter from “the West.” So long as governance revolved around “tribe” as its fulcrum, as it

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did since the colonial period, every institution in the country would reflect a tribal arithmetic.

I ask the reader to shed certain media-driven preconceptions before reading this book. The first of these is that Amin was a Hitlerite presence in Africa. Amin's public performance—especially his buffoonery—was an integral part of his style of governance. He invited his adversaries to underestimate him, even to think of him as a buffoon. His rhetoric included Hitlerite proclamations (including actual praise of Hitler), but that was not the same as committing Hitlerite atrocities. The Asian expulsion is said to have been a Hitlerite act. Yet, as we shall see, even as Amin ethnically cleansed Uganda of Asians and expropriated them, he did everything in his power to spare Asian lives.

The second media-driven preconception is that Museveni has been an effective antidote to Amin, promising a return to a rule of law, and a guarantee of a return of Asians, previously exiled, and of international capital, allowing the way for an era of prosperity.

I began writing this book as a witness, as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's proverbial Owl of Minerva who takes flight at dusk, trying to make sense of events in retrospect. As I continued to write, I realized that I had been a participant and not just an observer in many of the events I was narrating. Some may think it self-indulgent to straddle the position of an observer and a participant. But the recognition of "dirty hands" is also an opportunity for self-reflection. It has led me to formulate a set of fresh questions.

One of twenty-three beneficiaries of scholarships America gifted to Uganda at independence in 1962, I was also among the Asians expelled in 1972. I took my first academic job at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1973, became part of exile politics until the overthrow of Amin in 1979, and finally returned to Uganda in 1980. Turning down FRONASA's offer to go to the bush that same year, I chose to pursue politics above ground with comrades who had come back from Tanzania after the fall of Amin, working alongside the Museveni-led National Resistance Movement (NRM) when it came to power in 1986, but without joining it, only to part ways soon after. Rather than risk a second and a third expulsion, I chose to leave and to take on academic jobs in South Africa

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and the United States. I returned home every summer, finally to work as director of Makerere Institute of Social Research for twelve years (2010–2022). The lesson I had learned was to continue to work above ground to preserve life and pass on its lessons to the next generation.

I introduce the immediate protagonists in the Asian expulsion of 1972, the Nubi and the Bayindi (Indians), in the opening two chapters of this book. Both the Nubi and the Bayindi had come to colonial Uganda with the advent of British colonialism, and both had sheltered under its spreading wings, as either soldiers in the military or traders in the economy, but they faced different futures. The Nubi found a place in the postcolonial nation, the Bayindi found themselves outside the nation. Like the Nubi, the Bayindi had been colonized; but, unlike the Nubi, the Bayindi had come to be defined by colonial law as the racial other of the nation. I grew up in a racialized neighborhood in Kampala, played in race-exclusive fields, and prayed in racialized mosques. My father had a literary sensibility, but it seldom translated into a political one. My mother had a passion for justice, but it was channeled within narrow horizons, fighting for women's rights within our small religious community. How does the offspring of a middle-class Asian family break from their race-tinted and narrow political horizons? My political awakening began in the United States and matured in Dar es Salaam.

This book focuses on the Amin and the Museveni eras, both critical to the making of contemporary Uganda. The research for this book has depended on multiple sources: archival, historical, and ethnographic. My understanding of Amin has been a product of direct encounters in life and the travails of a scholar in search of primary sources—starting with the 1972 Asian expulsion. Some of those sources have been official, such as minutes of cabinet meetings under Amin and the report of Amin's 1975 commission into "disappearances." I also benefited from reading the then-unpublished memoir of Idi Amin's son, Jaffar Amin.

Above all, this book rests on firsthand ethnographic knowledge, comprised of my upbringing in Uganda until the age of seventeen and my later return to Uganda from the US to teach at Makerere University in 1972 and again from roughly 1980 to 1995. Then every academic summer since 1995, I returned to Uganda until I took over the directorship of the Makerere Institute of Social Research for twelve years (2010 to 2022).

My understanding of the Museveni years has been a product of face-to-face encounters, from the time I first met Museveni in Dar es Salaam in 1973 to the early years of his presidency. My understanding was immediate until I put

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together and contextualized the fragments of information from the Ugandan daily and weekly media. Only when the blood emerged did the picture become clear.

I present this narrative as an opportunity for the reader to see through the standard academic claim to “objectivity” and “neutrality.” I have come to question any claim of a single objective truth. It is more illuminating to think along the lines of Ibn Khaldun, who suggests that we see objective truth as an attribute we give God, for only an omniscient power can be privy to one objective truth. The truth we strive for and glimpse as humans is inevitably colored by our location and perspective. I invite the reader to share these changing vantage points, both social and political, that have shaped my own point of view.