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Idi Amin's conception of the Nationality Question in Uganda (1971-1979)

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ABSTRACT

Thematically, four interrelated issues form the crux of this paper's object of analysis namely; ethnicity, citizenship, race, and nationalism in postcolonial Uganda. The main question is: what is Idi Amin's conception of the nation? Such an articulation informed Amin's understanding of the nationality question. In that regard, the 1972 Asian expulsion is significant because it symbolized Amin's racialized conception of Uganda as a black African nation. While Obote I articulated the nation as secular through his public rhetoric of zero-tolerance towards ethnic and religious politicization, Amin conceptualized the nation in racial terms. The paper mainly argues that Amin's intervention on the nationality question can be read as operating within the same conceptual lenses of race and ethnicity to define Ugandan identity or citizenship. Obote's ethnic depoliticization policy which partly influenced Amin's politics was largely unsuccessful in its depoliticization strides. Given that the nation presupposed internal unity, the latter remained a major political challenge because Obote understood unity to imply uniformity: erasure of socio-cultural difference and embracing sameness (being a Ugandan) as the common unifier. For Amin, difference is not only recognized but also politicized thereby hindering national unity along racial and ethno-regional lines. In the 1971 coup, the triumph of Amin's Madi/Kakwa/Lugbara faction over Obote's Langi and Acholi faction in the army implied that ethnicity remained at the epi-center of the Ugandan state structure. Just as Obote, Amin sought to consolidate his political power through ethnically appointed henchmen in strategic military positions. No wonder, Acholi and Langi people who remained in support of Obote after his downfall were clear targets of Amin's ethnic purge immediately after seizing political power.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Citizenship, Nationalism, Idi Amin, 1972 Asian Expulsion.

Introduction

Ethnicity, citizenship, race, and nationalism are the conceptual themes shaping this paper's analytical frame. Idi Amin Dada is a polarizing figure in Ugandan political history. Whereas a multitude of literature ranging from scholarly works such as Mark Leopold's *Idi Amin: The Story of Africa's Icon of Evil* and Henry Kyemba's *A State of Blood: the Inside Story of Idi Amin*; to documentaries such as *How to Become a Tyrant* (episode three on Amin) and Forest Whitaker's role as Idi Amin in the movie: *The Last King of Scotland*, all characterize Amin as brutal, vicious and bloodthirsty. In spite of that, there is some admiration for Amin as a nationalist especially amongst Ugandan locals springing from his infamous expulsion of Asians in 1972. Many black Ugandans viewed the expulsion with a popular stance claiming Amin resonated with their impoverished position of economic slavery by the industrious Asians understood as a privileged class bequeathed by the colonial state structure with steering Uganda's economy.¹ Theoretically, the larger question underlying the expulsion is: what is the nation according to Amin? Whilst Obote I articulated the nation as secular through his public rhetoric of zero-tolerance towards ethnic and religious politicization, Amin conceptualized the nation in racial terms and to a degree sought to Islamize Uganda.

Against the grain, Amin's rise to power debunked the colonial precedent of Protestants as rulers with Catholics second in-command and Muslims at the bottom of Uganda's leadership pyramid during the heyday of colonialism. With Amin as a Muslim – the political minority, it meant that tables had turned. Although Obote framed departicipation as the eradication of ethnic, religious and racial differences from the political space geared towards depoliticization, instead Idi Amin exacerbated these subjectivities in-part due to Obote's shortcomings especially on the siege of Mutesa II's palace which galvanized a re-politicization of ethnicity mainly among the Baganda. Another part is that, the triumph of Amin's Madi/Kakwa/Lugbara faction over Obote's Langi and Acholi faction in the army implied that ethnicity remained at the epi-center of the Ugandan state structure. Just as Obote, Amin sought to consolidate his political power through ethnically appointed henchmen in strategic military positions. Little wonder, the Acholi and Langi people still adamantly in support of Obote after his downfall were clear targets of Amin's ethnic purge. Our discussion starts from there, as a precursor to Amin's conception of the nationality question framed as: what is the Ugandan nation? Who is a Ugandan and what qualifies one as Ugandan?

¹ Kirunda-Kivejinja, A.M. *Uganda: The Crisis of Confidence*. (Kuala Lumpur: Excel Vision Education Sdn Bhd, 1995): Pp. 172-180

The paper mainly argues that Amin's intervention on the nationality question can be read as operating within the same conceptual lenses of race and ethnicity to define Ugandan identity or citizenship. Obote's ethnic departicipation policy which partly influenced Amin's politics was largely unsuccessful in its depoliticization strides. Given that the nation presupposed internal unity, the latter remained a major political challenge because Obote understood unity to imply uniformity: erasure of socio-cultural difference and embracing sameness (being a Ugandan) as the common unifier. For Amin, difference is not only recognized but also politicized thereby hindering national unity along racial and ethno-regional lines. In the 1971 coup, the triumph of Amin's Madi/Kakwa/Lugbara faction over Obote's Langi and Acholi faction in the army implied that ethnicity remained at the epi-center of the Ugandan state structure.

Whereas the previous paper introduced the nationality question and Ethnic Departicipation policy under Obote I, the conceptual link between this paper and overall thesis is that such a policy partly influenced Amin's politics albeit was largely unsuccessful in its depoliticization strides. In Amin's reign, there was a resilience of ethnic political mobilization which Obote sought to suppress through pleas of unity which turned coercive from 1966 as the traditional institutions (kingdoms and chiefdoms) were abolished in the 1967 constitution. Unlike Obote and Amin, Abu Mayanja posited unity in diversity whereby difference is recognized rather than admonished. Mayanja's main critique of Obote's administrative mismanagement of diversity resonates with Amin's failed "economic war" against the Asians who were expelled on failure to manage difference. However, the politicization of difference is a colonial and postcolonial logic stemming from the nature of the nation-state which reproduces the instrumentalization of subjectivities leading to mismanagement of difference. The neo-patrimonial school of thought which focuses on personalities can easily fault Obote and Amin as agents of the state, however, a conceptual probe of the state itself which this paper and the next highlight is an institutional problem with the nation-state.

Amin's purge of the Acholi and Langi faction in the army

Ugandan politician Kirunda-Kivejinja narrates the tragic ordeal that befell the Acholi and Langi people when Amin seized power. In Gulu barracks, many young soldiers who had been recruited to serve in what "had been designed as a privileged Northern army with a mission to keep Obote in power" became victims of a murderous squad with orders to shoot in the full gaze of a helpless public.² Between 1971-1973, several Acholi and Langi were slaughtered as some leading figures such as Erinayo Oryema (Commissioner of Police), Captain Engeta (the District commander of Lira) and Yekosofati Engur who were formerly Obote stalwarts chose to accept service in the initial government of Amin showing loyalty

² Ibid. Pp.164-165

to the coup.³ However, the purge relentlessly continued. Given the “tribal-base composition of national institutions”, Amin saw every Langi and Acholi in the army “as a potential enemy who had to be eliminated on sight.”⁴ Kirunda-Kivejinja adds that, the army being exclusively drawn from a small section of the population meant that such massacres could go unnoticed by the general Ugandan society who were more or less forbidden from the army.⁵ Kirunda-Kivejinja contends that the killings of Acholi and Langi within closed army barracks “formed the thick carpet of blood on which the military dictatorship placed its firm and comfortable seat.”⁶ In other words, these killings helped Amin consolidate his military government.

With Obote in Dar-es-Salaam, his Acholi and Langi faction were helpless which debunked the colonial myth of “marital tribes” theory which turned out as a terrible betrayal on the military command of Obote.⁷ Given that the marital theory inculcated the fiction that Northerners were brave warriors thus recruiting them in the military, whereas Southerners were mythologized as more intelligent thus recruiting them in the civil service meant that the Acholi and Langi were prone to internal attack from a rival Northern faction.⁸ Although the marital theory specifically served colonial interests of discouraging Baganda and Banyoro from joining the colonial army, the logic was that these kingdoms (Bunyoro and Buganda) were politically and militarily strong in the nineteenth century hence it would be easier to consolidate British colonial rule recruiting less politically organized people from Northern Uganda.⁹ In effect, the marital theory impeded the creation of a nationalistic army (with people hailing from all different parts of the country) which could have prevented the massacre.¹⁰ For Kirunda-Kivejinja, “tribal armies are deathbeds in any shake-up.”¹¹

Indeed, official government reports claimed Amin waged a war against the Acholi and Langi.¹² In the early period of Amin’s regime, an insider from 1971-1977 wrote the pattern of atrocities: “His [Amin’s] ‘enemies’ at this stage were principally the Acholi and Langi. Obote was a Langi [sic] – sufficient reason for Amin to suspect the entire tribe – and the Acholis also formed a large proportion of the armed forces; Amin lumped them together. He used to tell his Cabinet that there were ‘mopping-up’ operations going on, but we [the Cabinet] had no idea what this meant until later... The deaths mounted into the hundreds.

³ Ibid. Pp.165

⁴ Ibid. Pp.165

⁵ Ibid. Pp.165

⁶ Ibid. Pp.165-166

⁷ Ibid. Pp.166

⁸ Ibid. Pp.159-160

⁹ Ibid. Pp.159

¹⁰ Ibid. Pp.166

¹¹ Ibid. Pp.166

¹² Uganda Government, 1972: Pp.71

At Malire, thirty-two senior Langi and Acholi officers were herded into a room and blown up with explosives. Of several hundred Langi soldiers who had obeyed Amin's call to report back to their barracks at Lira, scores were bayoneted and thrown into the Nile. On another occasion, several hundred people – soldiers and civilians – fled into Sudan, intending to join Obote. They were stopped by Sudanese guerrillas, and later executed on Amin's orders."¹³ These two groups were widely perceived as “the main beneficiaries of Obote's administration” and majority of people from the other ethnic groups “tended to be indifferent to the massacres that were taking place.”¹⁴ Such a perception is theoretically significant to the conceptualization of *Mwe Abali Mu Kintu* as we shall discuss in the proceeding paper. This is because an ethnic group or individuals perceived to benefit from the regime in power tend to be victims of political violence, who are targeted by majority people who perceive themselves as excluded from the spoils of power or personal consumption.

Major Oboma, a senior Acholi officer, strived to co-opt the support of Acholi and Langi people through making an appeal to them on Uganda Radio to accept the change of government from Obote to Amin.¹⁵ Clearly, the government of Amin and the population evaluated and perceived security and allegiance in linguistic and ethnic terms.¹⁶ The language spoken often reflected an ethnic community from which one hailed therefore, these determined whether one is considered an enemy or friend to Amin's government who promulgated himself as supreme authority and in-charge of the military in the Armed Forces Decree 1 of 1971.¹⁷ On 20th February 1971, Amin promoted himself to the rank of full General and also declared himself President of Uganda.¹⁸ Following Obote's pattern, Amin restructured the army given the clashes between pro and anti-Amin troops, rewarding loyal soldiers with promotions to strategic units for instance, Major S. G. Lukakamwa and Major B. Kili who were appointed Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster – General (GAO 1/1971) and the Acting Commander of the Army (GAO 7/1971) respectively.¹⁹ Similarly, junior officers were given high ranks on the basis of their known loyalty to Amin rather than their competence.²⁰

A breakdown of the total recruits within the army indicates a linguistic and religious bias: some “4000 were former Sudanese Anya Nya and Zairean rebels, and most of the rest were from Amin's own West Nile District. At one point in 1971, the proportion of Muslims in the Army was estimated at 40 per cent. Many of the recent recruits (154) were enlisted straight away as officers of the rank of Second Lieutenant

¹³ Kyemba, Henry. *A State of Blood: the Inside Story of Idi Amin*. (London: Paddington Press, 1977): Pp.44-45

¹⁴ Omara-Otunnu, Amii. *Politics and the Military in Uganda 1890-1985*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987): Pp.104

¹⁵ Uganda Government, 1972: Pp.32-33

¹⁶ Omara-Otunnu, Amii. *Politics and the Military in Uganda 1890-1985*. Pp.104

¹⁷ Decree 1 of 1971, GAO 3/1971; Omara-Otunnu, Amii. *Politics and the Military in Uganda 1890-1985*. Pp.105

¹⁸ *Uganda Argus*, 21st February 1971.

¹⁹ Omara-Otunnu, Amii. *Politics and the Military in Uganda 1890-1985*. Pp.105

²⁰ Legum, Colin. “Britain ready to discipline Amin's mutineers”, *The Observer*, 25th July 1971.

or above (GAO 40/1971).”²¹ Amin’s purge of Acholi and Langi people in the army meant that he replaced them with his loyalists heavily inclined towards an ethnic and religious bias. To that extent, Amin inherited Obote’s ethnic recruitment in the military as a strategy to consolidate political power through the coercive arm of the state. Unsurprisingly, the popularity of the regime reduced due to assaults, looting, rape, and terror acts against civilian populations by government soldiers.²² Fierce decrees compounded misery as the Penal Code (Amendment) Decree made unlawful gatherings “punishable by seven years imprisonment” and the Detention (Prescription of Time Limit) Amendment Decree authorized detention for “an unlimited period without trial” thus giving Amin’s regime power to eliminate any opponents.²³ Such a state of terror became a recipe for disaster as the unarmed masses were at the mercy of indisciplined armed forces, these polarizations worsened by ethnic and religious politicization meant that the nation Amin presided over or attempted to restructure was far more divided than united.

From a political historical view, Phares Mutibwa summarized the early years of Amin’s reign riddled with armed incursions as follows:

“Most of the killings in the army during the first twenty months took place in four phases or incidents. The first was when a coup was attempted in July 1971 and Acholi and Langi soldiers were massacred at Jinja, Moroto and Mbarara barracks; the second was at Mutukula on the Uganda-Tanzania border in February 1972; the third was during another attempted coup in June 1972; and the fourth...occurred after the invasion in September 1972... Thus, although the public did not know it, this early period of the Amin regime witnessed unprecedented organised violence... Foreigners as well as Ugandan civilians tended to see these killings as no more than the normal ‘mopping up operations’ that follow a coup. But the murders of the military officers were never reported, nor were they believed by Western diplomats.”²⁴

Social anthropologist Mark Leopold concurs with Mutibwa’s chronology, but disagrees on the aspect of Western diplomats feigning ignorance on Amin’s misdeeds. To him, the archives indicate that the British knew “quite a lot about what was going on, although they seemed largely unworried by it.”²⁵

The British High Commission’s Annual Review for 1971, written in January 1972 stated that: “The first half of the year was dominated by anxiety about the army... Suffice it to say here that the circumstances of the coup d’état sparked off tribal feuding in the army, which reached a climax in the shooting matches in June and July... and led to the murder or removal of most of the senior officers, whose places were

²¹ Omara-Otunnu, Amii. *Politics and the Military in Uganda 1890-1985*. Pp.108

²² *Uganda Argus*, 12th July 1971.

²³ Omara-Otunnu, Amii. *Politics and the Military in Uganda 1890-1985*. Pp.106

²⁴ Mutibwa, Phares. *Uganda since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes*. (London: Hurst and Co, 1992): Pp.88

²⁵ Leopold, Mark. *Idi Amin: The Story of Africa’s Icon of Evil*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021): Pp.215

taken largely by men without experience or qualification promoted from the ranks. The result was a breakdown in discipline and organization and a considerable amount of victimization and even killing of civilians as well as soldiers.”²⁶ From a political historical view, Omara Otunnu adds that: “The conduct of his [Amin’s] soldiers soon began to tarnish the relationship between the public and the regime. The soldiers were divided... and undisciplined, and they took advantage of the situation to engage in indiscriminate harassment of the civilian population for their own ends (something which they continued to do throughout Amin’s regime)... As far as the troops were concerned, the inauguration of military rule gave them license to get rich quickly, often by the use of the gun.”²⁷ Ironically, Sam Wilfred Aswa’s *Eighteen Points* justifying the military coup of 1971 promised the opposite of what transpired.

Warrant Officer (Class II) Sam Wilfred Aswa proclaimed over Radio Uganda *Eighteen Points* justifying the 1971 coup as “examples of matters which have left the people angry; worried and very unhappy” among them most notable are as follows: “The unwarranted detentions without trial for long periods of a large number of people many of whom are totally innocent... The lack of freedom in airing of different views on political and social matters... Widespread corruption in high places especially among ministers and top civil servants...The failure by political authorities to organize any elections in the last eight years whereby the people’s free-will could be expressed...The Lango Development Master Plan, written in 1967, decided that all key positions in Uganda’s political, commercial, army and industrial life, have to be occupied and controlled by people from Akokoro county in Lango District, at the expense of other areas of Uganda... Obote, on the advice of Akena Adoko, has sought to divide the Uganda armed forces and the rest of Uganda by picking out his tribesmen and putting them in key positions in the army and everywhere... We all want only unity in Uganda and we do not want bloodshed. Everybody in Uganda knows that. The matters mentioned above appear to us to lead to bloodshed only.”²⁸ In hindsight, Aswa’s *Eighteen Points* were false promises due to the carnage witnessed under Amin to whom Aswa on behalf of fellow soldiers claimed to handover power. Amin hired loyalists from his ethnic group or region strategically positioned in the army to consolidate political power – which likewise meant the massacre of Obote’s support amongst Langi and Acholi.

Amin’s re-politicization of Ethnicity

From a postcolonial theoretical perspective, Godfrey Mwakikagile argues that the massacre of the Langi and Acholi divided the country but worse still, Amin fueled regional hostilities when he favored “his

²⁶ UKNA FCO 31/1325: Acting British High Commissioner A.H. Brind, Uganda: annual review for 1971 (dated 11 January 1972).

²⁷ Omara-Otunnu, Amii. *Politics and the Military in Uganda 1890-1985*. Pp.103

²⁸ Government of Uganda (n.d. [1972a], titled *Uganda, the First 366 Days of the Second Republic*; Leopold, Mark. *Idi Amin: The Story of Africa’s Icon of Evil*. Pp.180-181

fellow tribesmen and their allies from the West Nile District by recruiting them into the army in large numbers to replace the Langi and Acholi.²⁹ Effectively, the ethnicization of the military by Obote and Amin deeply “divided the armed forces as well as other security organs including the police and entrenched ethno-regional loyalties across the spectrum.”³⁰ Mwakikagile says: “Amin’s coup depended on ethnic loyalties. Its perpetrators were principally West Nilers and Nubians, as well as some Southern Sudanese recently recruited into the Uganda army. West Nile men were promoted to take the places of the Acholi and Langi officers and soldiers. The army was expanded. Many of the new recruits were also West Nilers. Of the twenty-four top military posts in 1973, only three were not held by West Nilers; Among West Nile groups, the Lugbara in particular assumed a new prominence in the army.”³¹ Although the privileged position of the Lugbara and West Nilers re-politicizes ethnicity and regional loyalties, Amin inherited Obote’s introduction of the army as the principal arbiter of political contestation and power consolidation in Uganda. The barrel of the gun symbolized the legitimization of political power which is why, the army especially in crucial positions was filled with ethnic loyalists serving the personal interests of the President.

In order to redeem his political image at home, Amin ordered the return of Kabaka Mutesa II’s body from London to give it a decent traditional burial with his fallen ancestors at the historical site of Kasubi Tombs. In a statement Amin said that: “Sir Edward Mutesa was the first President of Uganda, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and Kabaka of the former Kingdom of Buganda. Because of the positions the late Sir Edward Mutesa held I, my family, my Government and the people of Uganda greatly respect the memory of the late Sir Edward Mutesa... it is only fitting that he should be buried at the site where his ancestors were laid to rest, at Kasubi. In making these funeral arrangements the Uganda Government at the same time wishes to make it clear that Uganda is one united Republic, and there can be no question of a return to feudal kings and kingdoms.”³² On several occasions, Amin reiterated his opposition to “tribalism” and his insistence that “kingdoms will not be re-introduced.”³³ To that extent, Kasfir contends that Obote’s policy that abolished kingdoms continued to guide the country.³⁴

²⁹ Mwakikagile, Godfrey. *Uganda: A Nation in Transition: Post-colonial Analysis*. (Dar es Salaam, New Africa Press: 2012): Pp.103

³⁰ Mwakikagile, Godfrey. *Uganda: A Nation in Transition: Post-colonial Analysis*. Pp.103

³¹ Ibid. Pp.103-104

³² Derek R. Peterson @Unseen_Archive via X (formerly Twitter) posts as homage to the late Owek. Joyce Mpanga.

https://x.com/unseen_archive/status/1726376303576686650?s=46&t=kf9ZxmWv0Hq7kVgetQkKlw

³³ *Uganda Argus*, 2nd February 1971, Pp.1; *The People*, 11th February 1971, Pp.1; *The People*, 15th February 1971, Pp.1; *Uganda Argus*, 11th October 1971, Pp.1; *Uganda Argus*, 26th January 1972, Pp.5.

³⁴ Kasfir, Nelson. *The Shrinking Political Arena: Participation and Ethnicity in African Politics, with a Case Study of Uganda*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976): Pp.215

Similar to Obote's ethnic departicipation policy that publicly barred ethnicity from the political space, Amin said after taking over power that: "We want to build our country as a single united and strong nation, and not as a federation of petty and powerless tribes that are jealous of one another."³⁵ However, political scientist Kasfir claims that Amin's opposition to "tribalism" is marred by three key contradictions manifesting from his coup. Firstly, "he had to explain why he intervened (or, in his version, why the "soldiers" intervened and then insisted he accept office). Second, he had to adopt measures that would immediately increase his legitimacy; and, finally, he had to cope with the ethnic problems which remained subterranean factors in Ugandan politics. In each case he laid stress on ethnicity in explaining political behavior."³⁶ In the first instance, Kasfir is alluding to *Aswa's Eighteen Points* whereby the soldiers portrayed themselves as benevolent heroes saving the country from a state of captivity by Obote and his loyalists; transferring such power to Amin. As earlier explained, the 1971 coup had a glaring ethnic component as Amin's Madi/Kakwa/Lugbara faction seized power for personal aggrandizement among other reasons. In the second instance, Amin sought to legitimize power by returning Kabaka Mutesa II's body which would guarantee a modicum of popular appeal within the majority Baganda population. Thirdly, the ethnic problems in Ugandan politics included the regional development patterns which were heavily inclined towards Southern over Northern Uganda (generally) and Buganda over the rest of Uganda (specifically). Such regional imbalance implied that ethnicity had to be deployed as a political measure to avert the disproportional regional development in the country causing disunity.

Besides returning the Kabaka's body, Amin's government released fifty-five of the ninety-two detainees many of whom were publicly recognized as prominent Baganda which lifted the state of emergency in Buganda and therefore created the effect of reinforcing ethnic identity among Baganda.³⁷ Also, there were ceremonies held at Bamunanika, one of the former Kabaka's palaces, "to give his son Ronald Mutebi some of the indicia of the Kabakaship without actually making him Kabaka. The names of East and West Mengo districts were changed to East and West Buganda, thus restoring the name *Buganda* to a sort of official status."³⁸ Amin consulted "the former kings and constitutional heads and even released one from prison" among ethnic groups in other parts of the country.³⁹ Amin disagreed with Obote's treatment of

³⁵ "Speech to the Nation by His Excellency Major-General Idi Amin Dada," *The Uganda Gazette* 64, no.8 (26th February 1971): Pp.79

³⁶ Kasfir, Nelson. *The Shrinking Political Arena*. Pp.215

³⁷ *The People*, 29th January 1971, Pp.1; "Speech to the Nation by Amin," Pp.80; *The People*, 5th April 1971, Pp.1; "Out of Africa," *Africa Report* 16, no.6 (June 1971): Pp.6; Kasfir, Nelson. *The Shrinking Political Arena*. Pp.216

³⁸ Kasfir, Nelson. *The Shrinking Political Arena*. Pp.216-217

³⁹ *The People*, 17th February 1971, Pp.1

“these people as enemies,” and henceforth he was calling to meet them presumably to rectify that “error”.⁴⁰

Division of Acholi and Karamoja as the first new districts created since independence led to an ethnic demand for districts as secession from the mainstream – given that East Acholi notables “made several previous attempts to gain their own district.”⁴¹ Resultantly, the Baamba and Bakonzo “middlemen immediately demanded that Amin consider their claim for separation from Toro district.”⁴² Amin organized a meeting with leaders from both sides and those from the Rwenzururu Kingdom government “rejected the possibility of a separate district as a derogation of its independent status.”⁴³ Such demands for ethnic territories or districts serves to indicate the revival of ethnic political participation given some of these disputes like that of the Baamba and Bakonzo predates Amin and has a deep history from the late colonial period.⁴⁴ Amin introduced councils of “elders” comprising local notables usually chosen by the district commissioner to replace the district councils he had dissolved. However, Kasfir contends that the structure is “strongly reminiscent of colonial efforts to establish indirect rule by building up pseudo- or quasi-traditional structures.”⁴⁵ Essentially, the councils of elders are discussed “...as if they are based on traditional customs and represent an ethnic unit rather than an administrative area.”⁴⁶ Put simply, Amin’s council of elders is a revival of colonial customary law as the “elders” are understood as custodians of traditional customs within an administrative unit or ethnic territory – a structure which instrumentalized ethnic identity as the principal form of subjectivity determining the relationality between an ethnicized individual and the Ugandan state.

In some speeches, Amin often discussed people “as if their ethnic identity were the most salient feature of their personality...which reinforced ethnic self-definition much as the colonial, DP, and UPC governments did before 1966.”⁴⁷ For instance, Amin referred to Obote’s partisans in Tanzania undergoing military training as “Alur, Acholis, and Bagisu... According to the latest information, Lango are no longer in the majority... Alurs and Jonams were being smuggled out of the country to Tanzania...”⁴⁸ Just as Obote rewarded the Acholi and Langi with key positions in government and the military, under Amin – the Nubians became an important political factor because they held “many important positions at the top

⁴⁰ *The People*, 18th February 1971, Pp.1; “Speech to the Nation by Amin,” Pp.79; Kasfir, Nelson. *The Shrinking Political Arena*. Pp.217

⁴¹ *The People*, 22nd March 1971, Pp.1; *The People*, 9th April 1971, Pp.1; Kasfir, Nelson. *The Shrinking Political Arena*. Pp.217

⁴² Kasfir, Nelson. *The Shrinking Political Arena*. Pp.217

⁴³ *The People*, 4th-6th May 1971; Kasfir, Nelson. *The Shrinking Political Arena*. Pp.217

⁴⁴ For more on this subject, see: Sseremba, Yahya. *The State and the Puzzle of Ethnicity: Rethinking Mass Violence in Uganda’s Rwenzori Region*. (Kampala: Makerere Institute of Social Research, 2021)

⁴⁵ Kasfir, Nelson. *The Shrinking Political Arena*. Pp.218

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Pp.218

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Pp.219

⁴⁸ *Uganda Argus*, 14th October 1971, Pp.1; *Uganda Argus*, 19th January 1972, Pp.1; *Uganda Argus*, 8th July 1972, Pp.1

levels of both the government and the army and seem to have received many of the businesses reallocated by the government after the expulsion of the Indians and Pakistanis.”⁴⁹ Indeed, Kasfir argues that “Amin’s actions and speeches have certainly increased the relevance of ethnicity for Ugandans, both in categorizing people and in explaining their conduct.”⁵⁰ Both Obote and Amin conceptualized national unity as eradication of ethnicity from the political space, however, the main difference is that whereas “Obote consistently implemented a government policy that avoided ethnicity, particularly in public, Amin has barely paid lip service to ethnic departicipation.”⁵¹ In other words, Amin did not depoliticize ethnicity as Obote publicly tried, rather his public speeches as well as political strategies re-politicized ethnicity which implies that the policy of ethnic departicipation largely failed.

Asian expulsion: Amin’s racialized conception of the nation

In 1972 at Tororo barracks, Amin claimed to have received “divine revelation” to resolve the country’s “old colonial relief of Asians in Uganda.”⁵² Amin decreed that Non-citizens have 90 days to leave the country.⁵³ Kirunda-Kivejinja contends that “there was nothing faulty with the rationale and logic, behind Amin’s command.”⁵⁴ Amin argued that: “Asians were brought to build the Railway. The railway was finished and they have no cause to continue being in Uganda... their masters who brought them, the British colonialists, left them behind and should make arrangements to collect them.”⁵⁵ There were two major contentions behind the expulsion. Firstly, is the issue of citizenship that Asians were “given the option to become citizens at the time of Independence, a majority of Asians decided to retain their British citizenship.”⁵⁶ Second is the colonial stratum that privileged Asians over Africans leading to the perceived exploitation of the latter by the former. Kirunda-Kivejinja claims that “the grievances Africans felt against this colonial stratum specifically introduced to facilitate the economic exploitation of the country became in Amin’s dream clear, visible, and pronounced.”⁵⁷ Amin sought to decolonize the economy by placing the destiny of the country “in the hands of its rightful owners” that is: Ugandan Africans.⁵⁸ Due to that, the Asian expulsion became highly popular amongst the local population.⁵⁹

⁴⁹ Kasfir, Nelson. *The Shrinking Political Arena*. Pp.220

⁵⁰ Ibid. Pp.220

⁵¹ Ibid. Pp.220-221

⁵² Kirunda-Kivejinja, A.M. *Uganda: The Crisis of Confidence*. Pp.171; *Uganda Argus*, 5th August 1972.

⁵³ Ibid. Pp.171

⁵⁴ Ibid. Pp.171

⁵⁵ Ibid. Pp.171

⁵⁶ Ibid. Pp.171-172

⁵⁷ Ibid. Pp.172

⁵⁸ Ibid. Pp.172

⁵⁹ Ibid. Pp.173

Kirunda-Kivejinja frames the Asian expulsion as an “economic war” given Ugandan Africans or “indigenous populations” saw the expulsion as their “first opportunity to secure economic self-determination.”⁶⁰ Although “elitist indigenous educated technocrats” mainly the Baganda manned the civil service, the overwhelming rationale is that the colonial structure survived and flourished “by keeping indigenous population safely out of the system, out of their government, their economy, and their military structures” whilst commerce and industry were entrusted to the Asian community.⁶¹ To reinforce the racialized conception of the Ugandan nation, the Asian community were excluded from “buying land for settlement...this left them in the cities, estates and towns, where land was nationalized and leased to them by the government with titles” thus explaining why the “majority of Asians opted for British citizenship rather than Ugandan at Independence.”⁶² In effect, the Asians were understood as “not-belonging” to the Ugandan state mainly because of their race, but also because Ugandan Africans and Amin perceived them as a closed identity since Asians often married within themselves which rendered intermarriages between Asians and Africans rare. Such a cultural perception largely dissociated both identities.

Unlike Obote, Amin perceived the nationality question as the ‘Asian’ problem; his solution was expelling Asians as a form of ‘Africanization’ of the economy thus projecting him as a “nationalist leader” seeking political legitimacy but also he believed Asians had their ‘home’ they could return to given that they had “refused to identify” with Uganda.⁶³ Basically, Amin argued that Asians had a ‘closed’ identity influencing their refusal to identify with ‘indigenous’ Ugandans.⁶⁴ In effect, Amin perceived the nationality question in racial terms as indigenous or native Ugandans needed to be protected from economic exploitation by ‘settlers’ or Indians who were non-natives implying that they could return to their place of origin in Asia thus the expulsion. Implicitly, Amin perceived citizenship as a “mutually exclusive phenomenon” that Asians would be included as Ugandans upon denouncing their residence to other locations and commit to Uganda as ‘home’.⁶⁵ Amin’s intervention on the nationality question can be read as operating in the same conceptual categories of race and ethnicity to define Ugandan identity or citizenship. Under Museveni, as we shall discuss in paper 6, the Asian community in Uganda are perceived as “investors” although there is a poignant feeling amongst Ugandan Asians as being strangers

⁶⁰ Ibid. Pp.180

⁶¹ Ibid. Pp.180-181

⁶² Ibid. Pp.182

⁶³ Kasule, J. *Islam in the State: A Genealogy of the Muslim Minority Question in Uganda*. (Makerere University – PhD-thesis, 2018): Pp.126-129

⁶⁴ Ibid. Pp.129

⁶⁵ Ibid. Pp.129

without a political sense of belonging as Ugandans, despite centuries of history indicating some as born in Africa not Asia.⁶⁶ Thus, making them Africans but of Asian descent.

Interestingly, many of the Asians subject to Amin's expulsion from Uganda in 1972 were born in Uganda; their families had been in Uganda for generations so they had nowhere to go as the feminist historian Alicia C. Decker narrates.⁶⁷ Mamdani adds that: "people left their cars at the airport, they left keys in the car. Nobody could figure out what was happening to them... Imagine in a country where you had made your whole life and your several generations – and you were leaving, there was not a single person to say goodbye."⁶⁸ Without doubt, the expulsion was popular because it resonated "very deeply with the demands of the vast majority of people" but whether it was "successful" is a different question.⁶⁹ In response, Alicia C. Decker argues that it was unsuccessful because there was a "massive economic crisis" as the Uganda Africans who received Asian property lacked the requisite skills to manage such economic enterprises.⁷⁰

A retired manager of Uganda Hotels shared with me in an interview that the Ugandan Africans who received Asian property were referred to as *Mafuta Mingi* translating as "dripping in oil" describing Ugandans who became rich after taking over Asian businesses. He narrates the life-story as follows:

"I was supposed to get a shop but that day I did not work. Those people who received that property from Indians were called Mafuta Mingi. The day of distribution was my off-day. Nassulu Abdullah and Mariyamungu were Amin's right-hand men. I knew Nassulu Abdullah, I would have gotten a shop had I worked that day. Abdullah looked everywhere for me and asked people around where I was (around Equatorial street). There were no phones so you could not know. Indians used to ask me as the supervisor of black African workers. When Indians left, Nubians found us. I left during the era of the Nubis. They used to put uneducated people in-charge of you, so I decided to leave. They even wanted to arrest us; they disturbed us. They inquired why we did not want to work for them [Nubians] and arrested us on grounds that we wanted to join Obote in Tanzania and fight against Amin. But since I had studied with some Nubians in Amin's forces, they released me. I left during Amin's era and started doing my own things."⁷¹

Phrases such as *Mafuta Mingi* serve as a historical precedent to *Mwe Abali Mu Kintu* as we shall discuss highlighting beneficiaries (real and imagined) acquiring vast amounts of wealth aided by state structures.

⁶⁶ <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n19/mahmood-mamdani/the-asian-question> Also see: Public Lecture & Discussion: Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Asian Expulsion from Uganda – What have we learnt over half a century? Lecture by: Prof. Mahmood Mamdani. (Makerere University, 2022)

⁶⁷ "How to Become a Tyrant" – Episode 3 on Idi Amin's Reign through Terror (Netflix Documentary, 2021)

⁶⁸ Mahmood Mamdani narration of the Asian expulsion as a contributor of Episode 3 on "How to Become a Tyrant".

⁶⁹ Mamdani contribution on the Asian expulsion – Episode 3 of "How to Become a Tyrant".

⁷⁰ Alicia C. Decker contribution on the Asian expulsion – Episode 3 of "How to Become a Tyrant".

⁷¹ Interview with a retired manager of Uganda Hotels Ltd on 14th June, 2023 from Ntinda, Nakawa division.

Although the Asian expulsion became a “massive economic crisis” as Alicia C. Decker narrated earlier, the operation was successful in terms of galvanizing support for Amin or legitimizing his regime amongst the black Ugandan population who largely felt economically impoverished. In that regard, many regarded Amin as a nationalist because he tried to liberate black Ugandans from a colonial structure of economic slavery. No wonder, Kirunda-Kivejinja agrees with Amin on the rationale behind the expulsion but not the method of execution. He says that: “If Amin had remained at his task and had not indulged in killing people, he would have died the greatest hero of the Ugandan people. Just as Obote will continue to be remembered as the person who received the instruments of Independence and ended the country’s feudal institutions, Amin will stand out as the one who destroyed the colonial economic structure by expelling the Asians.”⁷² In other words, Amin’s intent and radical approach of expulsion is what frames him as a nationalist and “hero” of the Ugandan people because of his recognition of their economic strife.

In brief, what is the theoretical significance of the Asian expulsion to Amin’s conceptualization of the nationality question? First, the Asian expulsion demonstrated Amin’s conceptualization of the nation in racial terms: Uganda is an African nation with a black indigenous population. Although such a position predated Amin’s era partly informing the discourse on the nationality question, the difference is that political leaders in the pre-independence and Obote I era largely encouraged racial harmony which galvanized a semblance of national unity between Ugandan Africans and Ugandan Asians. With Amin in power, the Asian community became a scapegoat for the impoverishment of Ugandan Africans which exacerbated racial disunity leading to their expulsion. Second, the Asian expulsion revealed that *race* is the major identifier of citizenship in Uganda debunking *birth* because many Asians were born and bred in Uganda but they were expelled because their race accorded them economic privileges within the colonial structure of the Ugandan economy. Thirdly, the Asian identity was understood as a closed identity by Amin because intermarriages were predominantly between fellow Asians whilst the African identity was understood as an open identity by Amin because Ugandan Africans seemed willing to have cross-cultural and interracial marriages. In effect, Amin enclosed Ugandan identity along racial and ethnic lines as those born and residing in Uganda (non-blacks) were deemed not-belonging.

Amin’s racialized conception of the nation and by implication – Ugandan citizenship critiqued views of renown public intellectuals such as Abu Mayanja who envisaged a multiracial, multi-ethnic society in Uganda whereby “discrimination based on race, religion or gender was not permitted.”⁷³ From a political historical perspective, Kasozi states that: “during a press conference following the launch of the UNC,

⁷² Kirunda-Kivejinja, A.M. *Uganda: The Crisis of Confidence*. Pp.184

⁷³ Kasozi, A.B.K. *Abu Mayanja, MP: The Intellectual Star of Uganda’s “Struggle” for Independence and the Search for a Liberal Democratic State, 1929-2005*. (Kampala, Progressive Publishing House Ltd: 2023): Pp.10

Musaazi was asked by an Asian reporter what he meant by placing the economy in the hands of citizens, and he could not give a straight answer. Immediately, Mayanja jumped to his rescue, stating that no foreigners coming to Uganda to settle as citizens should be denied UNC membership and by implication, state citizenship.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, “when several members of Parliament suggested including deprivation of citizenship as a clause in the 1967 Constitution, Mayanja realized that the proposal was aimed at Asians and strongly opposed it. He felt that it would be unfair to deprive people of citizenship, even if they had dual citizenship. He argued that doing so could lead to creating stateless persons.”⁷⁵ Clearly, Ugandan parliamentarian Mayanja sought to create safe-guards in the 1967 Constitution to guarantee protection to Ugandan Asians who faced the risk of being denied citizenship on grounds of their race. Put differently, Mayanja conceptualized a deracialized and de-ethnicized Ugandan nation that guarantees the recognition of socio-cultural difference.

Despite political leaders such as Obote, Amin and Mayanja agreeing on their wish for a united Uganda, they disagreed on the substantive form of unity to pursue. Obote advocated for total union of “one Country, one President and one Parliament based on total equality and similarity of governance structures for all regions of Uganda.”⁷⁶ In other words, for Obote, unity implied uniformity: erasure of socio-cultural difference and embracing sameness (being a Ugandan) as the common unifier. For Amin, difference is not only recognized but it is also politicized thereby hindering national unity along racial and ethno-regional lines. Under Amin, there is a resilience of ethnic political mobilization which Obote sought to suppress through pleas of unity – which turned coercive from 1966. However, for Mayanja: “unity did not require total amalgamation and uniformity... people of different cultures and traditions could live in one state without giving up their traditions and their ways of life... given the many diverse tribes in Uganda, unity in diversity was the most practical option for achieving consensus to work together as a nation.”⁷⁷

Mayanja states that: “I feel that we can be loyal to the state and render to it all the services that are due to it, in order that the state can also serve us, whilst at the same time we can retain other loyalties, and that separate loyalties, in fact, do cement each other; they are not mutually opposed, or exclusive. That, of course, brings in the third problem which is that of unity or uniformity. In my humble submission, true unity does not connote or require or even imply sameness or uniformity.”⁷⁸ Mayanja contended that “Government’s failure to manage diversity was the cause of disunity rather than the Baganda” who were

⁷⁴ *Uganda Herald*, 22nd March 1952; Kasozi, A.B.K. *Abu Mayanja, MP*: Pp.10

⁷⁵ Hansard, Motion: Enactment of a New Constitution, 5th July 1967, Pp.610-11; Kasozi, A.B.K. *Abu Mayanja, MP*: Pp.10

⁷⁶ Kasozi, A.B.K. *Abu Mayanja, MP*: Pp.9

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Pp.9

⁷⁸ Hansard, Motion: Enactment of a New Constitution, 5th July 1967, Pp.605-6.

being blamed for ethno-centrism and secessionism.⁷⁹ Effectively, Mayanja's critique of Obote's administrative mismanagement of diversity resonates with Amin's failed "economic war" against the Asians who were expelled on failure to manage difference. Without doubt, unity remains a nascent postcolonial challenge in Uganda demonstrated by the nationality question. Indeed, unity in diversity as proposed by Mayanja is the ideal aspiration, but the main structural problem manifested in quotidian reality is that: the politicization of difference is a colonial and postcolonial logic stemming from the nature of the nation-state which reproduces the instrumentalization of subjectivities leading to mismanagement of difference. Put simply, Obote and Amin can be faulted as agents of a larger institutional problem.

Amin's politicization of religion

In earlier papers, we discussed the birth of foreign religions especially Christianity during the colonial period. As they grew in prominence, religion and ethnicity became substantive forms of political mobilization. Although Obote tried to nullify their significance, religion and ethnic identity proved resilient under Amin as they were instrumentalized through his public iterations and political strategies. At the beginning of 1973, Amin ordered "58 Christian missionaries of European origin to leave the country immediately."⁸⁰ Early January 1973, Amin carried out a "major reorganization of religion in the Armed Forces, the ostensible purpose of which was to place the leadership of the various denominations in the Army in African hands."⁸¹ In spite of the fact that the order was generally phrased in terms of religion, "in practice it affected only the Christian denominations which had, until then, continued to employ a considerable number of European missionaries."⁸² Omara-Otunnu claims such acts were "the first clear suggestion of the hard time ahead for the Christian religion in Uganda."⁸³ Amin's restructure of religion in the army reinforces his racialized conception of the nation as he sought the Ugandan Africans to take charge of the country's leadership, the economy – which had proved structurally elusive and the army – which he understood as the coercive arm of the state; that legitimized power of the political leader.

As Amin consolidated power, he began to promote Islam in Uganda which inevitably provoked resentment from a population which was overwhelmingly non-Muslim.⁸⁴ From a political historical perspective, Omara-Otunnu adds that "Amin's drive to Islamize the country formally politicized religion in an otherwise secular state... the regime began actively to use Islam as one of the criteria for

⁷⁹ Kasozi, A.B.K. *Abu Mayanja, MP*: Pp.10

⁸⁰ Omara-Otunnu, Amii. *Politics and the Military in Uganda 1890-1985*. Pp.123

⁸¹ Uganda Government, 1973: Pp.55; Omara-Otunnu, Amii. *Politics and the Military in Uganda 1890-1985*. Pp.123

⁸² Omara-Otunnu, Amii. *Politics and the Military in Uganda 1890-1985*. Pp.123

⁸³ Ibid. Pp.123

⁸⁴ Ibid. Pp.123

recruitment and promotion in both the Army and the civil service.”⁸⁵ In February 1974, “Uganda was admitted as a Muslim state to the Islamic Summit Conference held in Lahore, Pakistan.”⁸⁶ Saudi Arabia offered financial assistance whilst other countries such as Switzerland offered Uganda military hardware as Amin undertook ambitious militarization schemes at the expense of the economy.⁸⁷ Amin launched a campaign by “deploying Army officers – including some of junior ranks – across the country to begin selecting several thousand chiefs at village, parish, sub-county and county levels.”⁸⁸

Intriguingly, the exercise was “the first phase of a military and Islamic penetration of the population at the local level. Those chosen as local chiefs were drawn both from the troops and from the civilian population, but in either case they came by and large from Amin’s Sudanic speaking group, and were mostly Muslims.”⁸⁹ The “militarization campaign” was Amin’s attempt to create a military dictatorship; “a further step towards the extension of military forms, personnel and practices to civilian institutions...Members of Amin’s special branches, the State Research Bureau and the Public Safety Unit, began to penetrate almost every sector of society to carry out intelligence work for the regime. With such pervasive surveillance, there was no way in which the people as a whole could organize themselves against the regime.”⁹⁰ The major claim advanced by Omara-Otunnu is that Amin’s promotion of Islam in the country was given a high priority; the recruitment of Muslims and Sudanic-speaking people in the army – which began in 1971 – became the usual practice, but the challenge was that the regime’s support base despite being committed, was both “narrow and unrepresentative.”⁹¹ Such a claim is plausible given the brutality of Amin’s army officers which alienated the public’s affection. In addition, the Muslim community were numerically small and a political minority juxtaposed with their Christian counterparts: the Protestants and Catholics who had historically been in the crucible of political power from the colonial, the independence and early post-independence period in Uganda.

Was Amin the first President to appeal to the Muslim identity and their community at large for political support? No, he was not because the nationality question significantly influenced the Muslim question in Uganda during Obote I as political theorist Joseph Kasule demonstrates.⁹² Kasule contends that the capacity of the Islamic identity to transcend race and nationality served Obote who used it as an

⁸⁵ Ibid. Pp.123

⁸⁶ Ibid. Pp.124

⁸⁷ Ibid. Pp.124

⁸⁸ Ibid. Pp.125

⁸⁹ Ibid. Pp.125

⁹⁰ Ibid. Pp.125

⁹¹ Ibid. Pp.128

⁹² Kasule, J. *Islam in the State: A Genealogy of the Muslim Minority Question in Uganda*. (Makerere University – PhD-thesis, 2018): Pp.119

“alternative center of power to challenge the recalcitrance of the Mengo establishment and thus provide legitimacy to his government within Buganda” hence becoming Obote’s response to Buganda’s exceptionalism.⁹³ Although the Catholic and Protestant identity also transcended race and nationality, the difference was that “Catholics had a political party, the DP, which was not limited to Buganda and thus posed a challenge to Obote’s UPC” which was predominantly Anglican.⁹⁴

On the other hand, Muslims “had no party to challenge Obote and could easily be integrated within it.”⁹⁵ Obote perceived Muslims as important allies and in turn; the Muslims also saw “an opportunity to gain in escaping historical political oblivion.”⁹⁶ Essentially, Obote capitalized on the “existing splits among Muslim elites in their counter-claims to represent Muslim masses” and considering their political inexperience, “Muslims could be trusted as “allies” without political ambitions.”⁹⁷ Obote “took advantage of the desire of Muslim elites to establish alternative centers of power so as to escape Kakungulu’s dominance.”⁹⁸ Prior to the independence period, “the Muslim leadership in Uganda had split between various factions. Majority Muslims still believed that Kakungulu was the leader of the Muslim community in Uganda. Unlike the early colonial moment when the question of Muslim representation bothered the colonial state, the Muslim community had, gradually become revealed as when the state chose Mbogo/Kakungulu as Muslim representatives (internal wrangles had also enabled self-revelation).”⁹⁹ Obote became less concerned with “who represented the Muslims” to “which Muslim group shall accept to work with the state?”¹⁰⁰ Such politics rendered Obote a factor in the Muslim question.

Furthermore, Kasule illustrates that because of “the split of the UPC-KY alliance, Kakungulu, as a Ganda royal, would not work with the UPC government. His loyalty to the Kabaka meant that UPC was denied the backing of such a large Muslim following that Kakungulu represented. Obote...proceeded to found his own association to “advance” the Muslim cause in Uganda; named it National Association for the Advancement of Muslims (NAAM).”¹⁰¹ Adoko Nekyon, Obote’s cousin, became the leader of NAAM which “appealed to the Muslims in Uganda” but in truth, “it was a distraction whose real object was to split the Ganda Muslim loyalty towards Prince Badru Kakungulu’s Uganda Muslim Community and create an alternate large Ganda following under the patronage of the state...the target was the social base

⁹³ Ibid. Pp.119

⁹⁴ Ibid. Pp.119-120

⁹⁵ Ibid. Pp.120

⁹⁶ Ibid. Pp.120

⁹⁷ Ibid. Pp.120

⁹⁸ Ibid. Pp.120

⁹⁹ Ibid. Pp.120

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Pp.120

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Pp.120-121

of Ganda political power.”¹⁰² However, it is important to note that there is an unresolved debate as to whether the idea behind the birth of NAAM is attributed to the UPC leadership or as Sheikh Abdul Obeid Kamulegeya contends that “the idea for its founding was conceived in Mecca, Saudi Arabia” at a Muslim conference in 1965.¹⁰³ Obote’s political intervention in the Muslim question served as a precedent to Amin’s relationship with the Muslim community after the military coup as he sought political legitimacy.¹⁰⁴

Kasule argues that “Amin courted the Islamic ideology and Muslims for two major reasons: to gain political support after the international backlash following the Asian expulsion, and to end their historical marginalization.”¹⁰⁵ Although Muslims “reaped the social-political-economic benefits of Amin’s regime, the biggest share went to Amin’s ethnic group” such state patronage “destabilized the historical balance of power both internally within the Muslim factions and externally with the Christian groups. As a violent wave of Muslim phobia engulfed Uganda during Amin’s ouster, the general Muslim population suffered from political violence orchestrated by “victims” of Amin’s regime.”¹⁰⁶ The latter point is significant because we saw that Amin massacred the Langi and Acholi to consolidate his political rule after ousting Obote, but also these were perceived as the beneficiaries of socio-economic and political benefits from Obote’s government. Now, we realize that the cycle of political violence shifted to the Muslims perceived as beneficiaries of Amin’s regime. Such a historical precedent is a violent precursor of the politics of *Mwe Abali Mu Kintu* which highlights perceived beneficiaries of Museveni’s NRM government but more significantly reveals an institutional problem with the nation-state structure which fosters the replacement of ethnic, religious or individual beneficiaries of state privileges who are just agents of a larger structural turn conceptual problem with the framework itself.

As Obote contributed to the foundation of NAAM, Idi Amin inaugurated the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) on 1st June 1972 as an institution advancing the affairs of Muslims in Uganda, and he became its patron.¹⁰⁷ UMSC’s foundation reflected “Amin’s attempt to centralize Muslim leadership in Uganda” and the unification of Muslim factions “guaranteed Amin a united social base that would provide durable political support for his regime.”¹⁰⁸ The attempt by Amin to draw Muslims “close to political power, destabilized the historical distribution of political influence in Uganda at two levels.”¹⁰⁹ Firstly, “within the Muslim community, the diverse Muslim publics continued to subsist under the UMSC.

¹⁰² Ibid. Pp.121

¹⁰³ Ibid. Pp.121

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Pp.126

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Pp.126

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. Pp.126

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. Pp.136

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. Pp.136

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Pp.127

Amin's centralization of Muslim leadership led to internal elite dominance when the schisms of the Obote I era re-emerged."¹¹⁰ Furthermore, "the history of internal Muslim organization depicting NAAM and UMC challenged Amin's attempt to end Muslim faction. Since NAAM members like Obeid Kamulegeya had political experience acquired from the Obote era, and since the Kamulegeya-led UMC had felt the brunt of NAAM-directed conflicts, Amin's centralization merely revealed the deep-seated political wrangles and power rivalry between Kakungulu's Kibuli and the latent 'NAAM' agents in the UMSC."¹¹¹ Kasule contends that the unifying leadership of the UMSC "reproduced the very structure of Muslim power that it had intended to heal thereby revealing the contradictory nature of Amin's attempt to centralize Muslim leadership."¹¹² Secondly, the "Muslim state patronage destabilized the historical distribution of power between the Muslims and the Christian groups in Uganda" since "the political role of Muslims had been secondary to the Christian groups."¹¹³

Significantly, "Amin's Muslim patronage favored particular groups as opposed to others; it allowed a particular group of Muslims to benefit from state privileges in multiple ways. As those close to power received material progress, those distant from it received residual benefits and status of protection; satisfied in the fact that they lived under Muslim leadership."¹¹⁴ Did Amin have Islam and Muslims at heart or did he "use" Islam and Muslims?¹¹⁵ Kasule claims that the latter is the central question around which debates on the historical role of Amin in the Muslim community coalesce.¹¹⁶ Whereas some scholarship has argued that we need to situate Amin "in the camp of men like Obote who "used" and "interfered" in Muslim spaces for their own political agendas."¹¹⁷ Yusuf Kasumba refuted the claim that "Idi Amin was a 'Muslim hero' who came to 'salvage' Muslims" instead believing that "Amin's politics did little to champion the Muslim cause; although some evidence points to the Muslim community as the largest beneficiary of Amin's regime, this was a residual consequence of the political atmosphere of the time."¹¹⁸ In other words, "Amin failed to conceive of a systematic plan to undertake a social political revolution by elevating Muslim society from its 'marginal' position in the country. Amin's contributions to the Muslim community were in other words cosmetic and not far-reaching."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁰ Ibid. Pp.127

¹¹¹ Ibid. Pp.127

¹¹² Ibid. Pp.127

¹¹³ Ibid. Pp.127

¹¹⁴ Ibid. Pp.128

¹¹⁵ Ibid. Pp.132

¹¹⁶ Ibid. Pp.132

¹¹⁷ Ibid. Pp. 132; Kasumba, Yusuf. "Attempts at a rejuvenation of Muslim Identity in Uganda: the Era of Idi Amin (1971-1979)", *Danubius*, XXXIII, 2015: Pp.379-408.

¹¹⁸ Kasule, J. *Islam in the State: A Genealogy of the Muslim Minority Question in Uganda*. Pp.132-133; Kasumba, Yusuf. "Attempts at a rejuvenation of Muslim Identity in Uganda: the Era of Idi Amin (1971-1979)", Pp.380.

¹¹⁹ Kasumba, Yusuf. "Attempts at a rejuvenation of Muslim Identity in Uganda: the Era of Idi Amin (1971-1979)", Pp.385

Other scholars argue that Amin did not “use” Islam, rather his regime must be situated within his multiple identities: “he perceived himself a nationalist, Muslim and an ethnic person, any of which must have influenced his political choices.”¹²⁰ Amin operated in a complex political environment “that militated against any Muslim revolution however much he may have desired it” henceforth “scholars like Kasumba who fail to understand Amin’s unique place in Uganda’s history unfairly chastise him.”¹²¹ Given the historical trajectory of Christian power in Uganda, “it would be difficult for any individual, however monumental his power extended, to reverse such a long historical trajectory.”¹²² Another perspective views Amin as the head of state who happened to be Muslim; his “nationalistic appeal may have stood out but ‘it was just part of his personal make up, as a military man, he considered discipline important in the success of any plan.’”¹²³

Despite all that, the fact is that some of Amin’s contribution to the Muslim community were mere “reactions to particular circumstances as opposed to carefully thought out plans that systematized intended actions.”¹²⁴ A Muslim leader has no doubt on Amin’s love for Islam and Muslims, he argued that “Amin’s contribution to the ‘Muslim community was not residual, he was after all a Muslim and he wanted his co-religionists to advance as well as the Christian groups” although doubts whether such actions constituted a revolution.¹²⁵ Perhaps, it is difficult to ascertain whether Amin truly had Islam and Muslims at heart, but what is undeniable is that Amin was politically agile; he pursued measures that served the ultimate aim of consolidating power and legitimizing his rule. He envisioned the Muslim community as a political support-base for his regime, however, this does not mean that Islam and Muslims were simply utilities (means to an end); it is highly plausible that Amin had these subjectivities as well as his ethnic identity at heart.

Another debate questions whether Uganda was considered a Muslim state because of the fact that the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) admitted it in 1974?¹²⁶ From a political science perspective, Iza Hussin has argued that “the Islamic character of a state can neither be based on the content of its laws nor the state’s willingness to enforce them.”¹²⁷ The assumption that “the laws of the ‘Quran and the laws of the state would be nearly as equivalent as modern man can manage’ is a powerful demand that centralizes

¹²⁰ Kasule, J. *Islam in the State: A Genealogy of the Muslim Minority Question in Uganda*. Pp.133

¹²¹ Ibid. Pp.133

¹²² Ibid. Pp.133

¹²³ Ibid. Pp.133

¹²⁴ Ibid. Pp.133

¹²⁵ Ibid. Pp.133

¹²⁶ Ibid. Pp.136

¹²⁷ Ibid. Pp.136

the role of the state in defining, containing and delivering Islam.”¹²⁸ Also, the assumptions overlook the fact that “there are multiple interpretations of Islam and... various expressions of being Muslim. The Sharia that the state applies is different from the one that ‘men and women call upon to critique’ its actions. The ‘Islamic law’, however and by whomever it is invoked therefore seems to carry the ‘shades of all these meanings and the grey areas between them.’”¹²⁹ Just as Hussin, Kasule believes that “the Islamic character of Amin’s regime can be seen in the assertions of the minority Muslims who claimed belonging to ‘Muslim’ leadership regardless of the fact that non-Muslims formed the majority of the population.”¹³⁰

Significantly, Amin’s revival of the Muslim identity into the political space alongside Catholics and Protestants maintained the historical politicization of religion and ethnicity as major forms of subjectivity defining the relationality between the individual/s and the Ugandan state. Both Obote and Amin strategically used Islam and Muslims for political legitimacy and attempts at consolidating power. Just as Obote’s government had the Langi/Acholi and UPC was Protestant in nature, Amin had the Kakwa/Lugbara and Nubians who were Muslims serving in high-ranks within the army. To that extent, religion and ethnicity remained instrumentalized in the political history of Uganda as these influenced strategies of regime longevity and political mobilization of the masses.

Conclusion

Theoretically, the main question that has shaped this paper is: what is Idi Amin’s conception of the nation? Such an articulation informed Amin’s understanding of the nationality question. In that regard, the 1972 Asian expulsion is significant because it symbolized Amin’s racialized conception of Uganda as a black African nation. Whilst Obote I articulated the nation as secular through his public rhetoric of zero-tolerance towards ethnic and religious politicization, Amin conceptualized the nation in racial terms. The paper mainly argues that Amin’s intervention on the nationality question can be read as operating within the same conceptual lenses of race and ethnicity to define Ugandan identity or citizenship. Hence, Obote’s ethnic departiculation policy which partly influenced Amin’s politics was largely unsuccessful in its depoliticization strides. Given that the nation presupposed internal unity, the latter remained a major challenge because Obote understood unity to imply uniformity: erasure of socio-cultural difference and embracing sameness (being a Ugandan) as the common unifier. For Amin, difference is not only recognized but also – politicized thereby hindering national unity along racial and ethno-regional lines.

¹²⁸ Ibid. Pp.136; Hussin, Iza R. *The Politics of Islamic Law: Local Elites, Colonial Authority and the Making of the Muslim State*. (University of Chicago Press, 2016): Pp.4

¹²⁹ Kasule, J. *Islam in the State: A Genealogy of the Muslim Minority Question in Uganda*. Pp.137; Hussin, Iza R. *The Politics of Islamic Law: Local Elites, Colonial Authority and the Making of the Muslim State*. Pp.6

¹³⁰ Kasule, J. *Islam in the State: A Genealogy of the Muslim Minority Question in Uganda*. Pp.137

During Amin's reign, there was a resilience of ethnic political mobilization which Obote sought to suppress through pleas of unity which thereby turned coercive from 1966 as the traditional institutions (kingdoms and chiefdoms) were abolished in the 1967 constitution. Unlike Obote and Amin, Abu Mayanja posited unity in diversity whereby difference is recognized rather than admonished. Mayanja's main critique of Obote's administrative mismanagement of diversity resonates with Amin's failed "economic war" against the Asians who were expelled on failure to manage difference. However, the politicization of difference is a colonial and postcolonial logic stemming from the nature of the nation-state which reproduces the instrumentalization of subjectivities leading to mismanagement of difference. The neo-patrimonial school of thought which focuses on personalities can easily fault Obote and Amin as agents of the state. However, a structural analysis of the state itself which this paper and the next highlight is an institutional problem with the nation-state.

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