

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/59h4m9rw>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 13(2-3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Okoth, P. Godfrey

Publication Date

1984

DOI

10.5070/F7132-3017104

Copyright Information

Copyright 1984 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Mamdani, Mahmood. Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1984. 115 pp., paperback, \$6.95.

The central theme of Dr. Mamdani's Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda is that Idi Amin was sustained throughout his dictatorial rule by one foreign power or another. The author gives evidence of British, American, Israeli, Russian, Arab and Kenyan involvement in Uganda and concludes by asserting that when imperialism no longer needed Amin, it conveniently disposed of him and replaced him with others who would serve its interests.

The study is divided into three parts: Part One deals with the historical background in Uganda--from colonialism to neo-colonialism. In this section, the author discusses the political economy of colonialism and the transition to neo-colonialism up to the time of the coup, January, 1971. Part Two deals with what the author calls "Neo-colonial Fascism," wherein he focusses on the nature of Amin's fascist dictatorship, 1971-1979. Part Three, which is the author's substantive part of his study, is about what he calls "Neo-colonial fascism and Imperialism." Here he highlights the role of varying imperialist powers in contributing to both the survival and demise of the Amin regime.

More specifically, Mamdani sets out to identify the link between the Amin dictatorship and international forces. He sets off with a brief examination of the historical links between British imperialism and comprador capitalists, maintaining that "Administratively, the colonial power created a social class which acted as an instrument of colonial rule...In the process the country was divided into two" (p.9).

In writing this book, the author tries to maintain a Marxist-Leninist interpretation of Uganda's history, as he did in his earlier piece, Politics and Class Formation in Uganda*--a thorough and scholarly piece of work that offers an alternative interpretation of political developments in Uganda. However, those who subscribe to the Mamdani school of interpreting Ugandan politics will find his most recent book, Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda, quite disappointing. The problem with the book starts with its title. By providing this title, the author seems to suggest that imperialism and fascism are two different phenomena, when actually they are only two facets of the same phenomenon.

The author starts by asking a question: "Why write another

*M. Mamdani, Politics and Class Formation in Uganda (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

book on the Amin regime?" which presupposes that his book ought to be the last one on Amin. This reviewer contends that there cannot be any last book on any historical phenomenon or event, as Mamdani's question seems to suggest. The Amin phenomenon is such an important issue that historians and political scientists must keep researching into it so as to try to provide some answers to why it came at the time it did, how it came about, what to do to prevent its recurrence, etc.

His center-periphery model makes him see imperialism everywhere, even where it does not seem to apply. This is far from suggesting that this reviewer condones imperialism; rather, this reviewer contends that imperialism is a factor, but not the only variable as the author seems to suggest. For instance, without going into the internal political dynamics of forces in Uganda that might have led to the war, the author claims that the Uganda-Tanzania war was "an imperialist solution" (pp. 107-108). By over-emphasizing imperialism, the author plays into the hands of potential African fascists who can then use the excuse to do anything and get away with it.

In handling the Ugandan predicament, the author seems to suggest that fascism was an historical phenomenon that was largely confined to Uganda, suggesting that African political system cannot be treated as a unit? Fascism was not exclusively a Ugandan affair, because Amin emerged in the midst of other fascists like Bokassa of the Central African "Empire", Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, only to mention these two.

The author discusses Ugandan politics in terms of leadership conflicts and factions--dividing people into categories such as "anti-people," "some learned opportunists like the Kibedi-Rugumayo-Nabudere clique" (p. 36). Were these people really opportunists and collaborators, or were they compatriots who had been called upon to serve the state? Did they foresee that Amin would soon turn into an ogre? When Amin indeed turned into an ogre, these so-called opportunists resigned, as the author actually acknowledges, although he questions the manner in which they resigned. The author seems unaware of the fact that the so-called Kibedi-Rugumayo-Nabudere clique resigned in the way they did, and gave the kind of reasons for resigning, in order to save the necks of their relatives inside Uganda (as they themselves were already outside the country). Did they resign wholly because of disagreement "on how to distribute the spoils of the 'economic war'" (p. 40) as the author would like us to believe? This is an important issue that warrants a thorough investigation and a serious analysis. The author simply asserts: "The victory of fascism ensues from armed clashes between rival factions in the anti-people camp" (p. 36).

Despite using fanciful terms and acronyms, in some parts

of the book the author's language may be unintelligible to an audience not familiar with Ugandan forms of expression--expressions such as "squeeze the peasant dry" (p. 11); "Those in the newly expanded army with suspect loyalties were...unceremoniously slaughtered" (p. 42) etc. Such expressions have to be explained to the reader, and not to assume that every reader will understand them.

Similarly, the author's style of writing leaves much to be desired. In his polemic with those writers who have concentrated on the phenomenon of Amin as a local product, he reverts to a rhetorical style. Arguing that such authors take refuge in 'neutrality,' 'facts,' Mamdani's own claim to a better approach is exposed in the following manner: referring to himself, he writes: "The author of this book makes no false claim to neutrality;" the impression being that his is a committed line of approach. To the rhetorical question: "Why false," i.e., why he does not make the claim of "false" neutrality, he answers: "Because no writer on social issues can be non-partisan." All plausible arguments. But to what extent he fulfils his "partisan" intentions, the book does not carry the weight of his premise. Take, for example, his analysis of what he describes as "an imperialist coup." He blames this on the role of international banks, especially the World Bank. His argument is that the Obote government's blind acceptance of the bank's economic recommendations, led the country into deeper and deeper financial crisis. This came about as the country was transformed into a producer of raw materials "for export" (p. 29), with the consequence that the harder the people worked the less they gained materially from their labour. Or as he puts it: "Inexplicably, commodities became scarce, prices rose, and the people found life more difficult" (p. 29).

Then the big question: "Why?" etc. This style is not only journalistic but also awkward and unscholarly, the very he accuses his antagonists of. He maintains rhetorical style throughout the book.

Finally, although the central theme of the book certainly has some merit, overall, the author fails in his attempt to dissect every nerve and muscle of fascism so as to identify the conditions and forces that facilitated it. Additionally, the author has uncovered a wonderfully rich subject that has lots of room for further source identification, expansion and proper documentation. This call therefore dismisses his rather arrogant question of "Why write another book on the Amin regime?" To the contrary, there is need for writing academically serious books on the Amin regime -- a direction G.N. Uziogwe* has pointed to.

*G.N. Uziogwe, "Uganda and parliamentary government," The Journal of Modern African Studies 21.2 (1983), p. 266.

Although the book is a product of foreign funds (as confirmed in the acknowledgements), it could as well have been written even without such funds, as there is no evidence that the author did any serious research--instead it has been hurriedly produced. The conventional interpretation of colonial policy pervades the author's thesis in one form or another throughout the book. The author's approach is too dogmatic, too narrow in the handling of its material, the book is lean, lacking any of the intellectual depth of his earlier Politics and Class Formation in Uganda; neither does the book add much in terms of quality beyond what the journalists Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey have chronicled in their War in Uganda,* which Mamdani does not cite, although the journalists acknowledge him in their book.

P. Godfrey Okoth,
Lecturer in History,
Makerere University; presently
on study-leave reading for a
Ph.D. in History at UCLA

Carlsson, Jerker (ed.): South-South Relations in a Changing World Order. Scandinavian Institute of African Studies: Uppsala, 1982. 160 pp.

While the development, expansion and the various concomitant crises of the capitalist system have generated lively if inconclusive debates, the implications of the recent changes within the capitalist system have not yet been subjected to a systematic and rigorous study. This volume is an attempt to fill the gap.

The book emerged out of a seminar organized by the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies to make some sense about the current restructuring of the world capitalist system since the 1970s and its broader impact on the developing countries. The collection of articles of varying quality and significance included in the book attempts to define and assess the forces behind the emerging relations between and among the developing countries commonly referred to as the South. The book as a whole provides an important insight into several aspects of the political economy of capitalism in its international dimension.

The first article, by Jerker Carlsson, provides the overall theoretical theme of the book. It focuses upon the observed restructuring of the world capitalist economy and the resultant

*T. Avirgan and M. Honey, War in Uganda: The Legacy of Idi Amin. (London: Zed Press, 1982).