

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Disciplining Citizens and Commodities: Economic Crimes and Accusations in 1970s Uganda

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Abstract

In 1975, the Ugandan state established an Economic Crimes Tribunal to investigate and penalize smuggling, hoarding, overcharging, and other commercial malfeasance. In the coming years, innumerable Ugandans were arrested and charged with contravening the state's economic regulations. Prior observers have seen this as another instance of a capricious state, but in this article, I demonstrate the popular investment in economic regulation. Ugandans demanded better stewardship of money and things because they were aghast at the ungovernable world of commodities. For one thing, the inaccessibility of so-called “essential commodities” — sugar and salt, preeminently — impeded ethical expectations surrounding social reproduction, hospitality, and masculine respectability. More troubling, essential commodities were not completely unavailable; rather, they were available on exclusionary and confusing terms. Relative deprivation was more upsetting than absolute scarcity because it offended a sense of consumptive entitlement. As a result, it was not only the state that accused citizens of economic crimes. There were widespread accusations in which allegation and denunciation circulated among neighbors, families, and bureaucrats in an urgent effort to discipline commodities and people.

Keywords: East Africa; Uganda; state; taxation; smuggling; postcolonial; economic crimes

On 21 April 1976 officers Okucu and Ekuma left the police station to walk the streets of Jinja, Uganda's second most important commercial town. Purposefully slipped into Okucu's pocket was a ten-shilling note with serial number A/29 334493. Dressed in plain clothes, they poked their heads into shops, inquiring as to supplies and prices — seemingly innocuous customers hankering for a deal. At a shop staffed by a young woman, Harriet Biryeri, they found the sort of deal they wanted: handing over their ten shillings for what the court later learned was 450 grams of unsliced white bread, the officers departed the shop only to return a moment later to arrest the cashier. Carefully retrieving their money from the till, they confiscated the unsliced loaf and hauled the “young offender” off to jail.

Biryeri's case would be heard two months later, in front of the Economic Crimes Tribunal. Confronted with the testimony of the officers, there was little she could do beside plead guilty to the crime of overcharging for a controlled commodity. Instead of the legally prescribed price of three shillings and forty pence, Biryeri partook in what at that time was a commonplace but illegal act of exchange: accepting more money than officially allowed in a sale. A presidential decree in 1975 established the Economic Crimes Tribunal, tasked with policing hoarding, overcharging, smuggling, and other malfeasance.¹ Such crimes were punishable up to death, and across

¹The Economic Crimes Tribunal Decree (#2 of 1975).

Uganda thousands were hauled before the special courts, confronted by cameras, crowds, and evidence of their improper market behavior.

For Major Erifazi, the chairman of the Economic Crimes Tribunal sitting that day in Jinja, justice would not be met merely by a declaration of guilt. Instead, it required adjourning the court and marching with those gathered to the store a few blocks away. There, the crowd confronted Mrs. Batambuze, the owner, whose absence on the day of the crime saved her from conviction. It did not, however, mean she walked away from the sting operation unscathed. Her pleas for mercy held little sway for Major Erifazi, who ordered her property seized, doors locked, and trading license canceled. As for the ten shillings, the court returned it to the police, and the bread was officially ordered to be destroyed.²

By the mid-1970s, Uganda's economy groaned under a combination of domestic misrule and international turbulence. During the prior decade the economy grew at a rapid clip, but by the 1970s, price inflation, commodity shortages, and diminished production ruled the day.³ Among Idi Amin's initial justifications for seizing power in the 1971 coup were the increasing costs of essential commodities and the economic decline under Milton Obote.⁴ In the following months, the junta's claim to legitimacy relied on the promise of economic transformation, and Amin's officials energetically went about promulgating new property regimes, reformed trade regulations, and enhanced agrarian production. He called this an "Economic War," a term that reflected the era's militarism.⁵ The 1972 expulsion of Uganda's Asians — vilified as alien exploiters — was a part of this thoroughgoing campaign to empower Uganda's African population.⁶ The considerable scholarly attention it has received, however, tends to divorce it from regulatory dramas that placed many others in the crosshairs, including those dragged before the Economic Crimes Tribunal.⁷

The control of prices and the channeling of trade through sanctioned circuits was not unique to Uganda; nor was the prosecution of economic crimes.⁸ In Kenya, provincial price controllers toured markets surreptitiously checking for illegal transactions.⁹ Tanzania created its own economic crimes tribunals as part of an expansive effort to govern production and exchange.¹⁰ In Ghana, the military's National Redemption Council led a "war against profiteers" in the early 1970s.¹¹ Postcolonial India criminalized a range of economic behaviors in order to further state planning. In Rohit De's assessment, this control of commodities installed a "permanent state of emergency," as national welfare justified coercive policing by a putatively democratic state.¹² These initiatives were indicative of

²Jinja District Archive, Jinja (JDA) Justice, Law, Order, and Security 64/23: Economic Crimes Tribunal 1975–79. Case No. BT/20 of 1976, the Republic of Uganda vs. Harriet Biryeri, 1976.

³Richard Reid, *A History of Modern Uganda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 236–38.

⁴UNA Office of the President Confidential 51/EC.9324: Economic War: "Uganda Advisory Board of Trade: A Brief on the Former State Trading Corporation."

⁵Uganda Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, *Uganda's Economic War* (Kampala: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1975).

⁶Anneeth Kaur Hundle, "Insecurities of Expulsion: Emergent Citizenship Formations and Political Practices in Postcolonial Uganda," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 39, no. 1 (2019): 8–23.

⁷Michael Twaddle, *Expulsion of a Minority: Essays on Ugandan Asians* (London: Athlone Press, 1975).

⁸Nor was it merely a phenomenon of the postcolonial world. Britain's imperial wartime economy had extensive price controls, as did the USA under the Office of Price Administration: Meg Jacobs, "How About Some Meat?: The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom Up, 1941–1946," *Journal of American History* 84, no. 3 (1997): 910–41. So did postwar China: Isabella Weber, *How China Escaped Shock Therapy: The Market Reform Debate* (London: Routledge, 2021).

⁹Kenya National Archives (Kakamega) AUS/1/5: Provincial Price Control Office, Annual Report for 1978.

¹⁰Ronald Aminzade, *Race, Nation, and Citizenship in Postcolonial Africa: The Case of Tanzania* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹¹Bianca Murillo, *Market Encounters: Consumer Cultures in Twentieth-Century Ghana* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), 137.

¹²Rohit De, "'Commodities must be controlled': economic crimes and market discipline in India (1939–55)," *International Journal of Law in Context* 10, no. 3 (2014): 277–94; see also Rohit De, *A People's Constitution: The Everyday Life of Law in the Indian Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), ch. 2.

widespread belief that the state's functionaries could and should intervene in commercial activity. Rather than a transcendental world of capital governed by individual interests, mid-century states attended to the particular instruments, organizations, and interfaces through which markets unfolded. What Ritu Birla calls "market governance" worked through manifold mechanisms, including street-level inspection of price tags and supply inventories.¹³

But it was not only state initiative. Citizens, too, were aghast at the inaccessibility of goods and the depreciation of their purchasing power. By drawing on citizen complaints, media reports, government correspondence, and legal records, I trace the widespread investment in economic regulation and the ethical expectations that motivated citizens to call for reforms to retail networks, price controls, and financial regimes. Three activities proved especially troubling: smuggling (known as *magendo*), hoarding, and mis-pricing. In response, Ugandans moved between registers of petition, protest, and claims-making — not only escape and evasion. In analyzing these practices, this article contributes to a recent revival of interest in 1970s Uganda, much of it focused on moving past earlier scholarly and popular writings that focused overwhelmingly on Idi Amin, his idiosyncrasies and depravations. Such work has shown the extent and historicity of racial thought beyond the whims of the dictator, detailed the industriousness of civil servants amidst disorder, and the struggle by medical professionals to continue providing care.¹⁴

This approach departs from standard accounts of the era. For many observers, the Ugandan state in the 1970s is emblematic of what Basil Davidson influentially called "the black man's burden," a thesis that posited the alien qualities of the bureaucratic nation-state and its distance from people's ideas about how authority should be maintained.¹⁵ Many others have emphasized a disconnect between "the state" and "society," with Idi Amin exemplary of the lack of organic connection.¹⁶ To be sure, the 1970s were characterized by immense violence and suffering. The Asian expulsion involved not only systematic dislocation and expropriation, but also opportunistic assaults, detention, and extortion. In the coming years, tens of thousands of Ugandans died and more disappeared. By 1974, the International Commission of Jurists thought "a total disregard for law and order in Uganda has resulted in a reign of terror."¹⁷ Security forces carried out abductions, torture, and assassinations. Ugandans used the name *mafuta mingi* to speak of those quickly enriched by the illegal economy, a term that gestures to their conspicuous access to consumer goods.¹⁸ Nearly everyone had to partake in criminalized transactions during the 1970s, but *mafuta mingi* were immune from the risks others faced thanks to their elite connections of kinship, language, religion, or cash. In response to state violence and

¹³Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Culture, and Market Governance in Late Colonial India*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

¹⁴Alicia Decker, *In Idi Amin's Shadow: Women, Gender, and Militarism in Uganda* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014); Mark Leopold, *Idi Amin: The Story of Africa's Icon of Evil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021); the special issue of *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 7, no. 1 (2013): 143–63; Derek Peterson, "Government Work in Idi Amin's Uganda," *Africa* 91, no. 4 (2021): 620–40; Marissa Mika, *Africanizing Oncology: Creativity, Crisis, and Cancer in Uganda* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2021); Anneeth Kaur Hundle, "1970s Uganda: Past, Present, Future," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 53, no. 3 (2018): 455–75.

¹⁵Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (New York: Crown, 1992). For the ill-fit of a nation-state to Uganda, see Nelson Kasfir, *The Shrinking Political Arena: Participation and Ethnicity in African Politics, With a Case Study of Uganda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); A. B. K. Kasozi, *The Social Origins of Violence in Uganda, 1964–1985* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).

¹⁶Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

¹⁷International Commission of Jurists, "Violations of Human Rights and the Rule of Law in Uganda," Report S-3143, Geneva, May 1974, 5–8, 25, <https://icj2.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Uganda-violations-of-human-rights-thematic-report-1974-eng.pdf>.

¹⁸Godfrey Asimwe, "From Monopoly Marketing to Coffee Magendo: Responses to Policy Recklessness and Extraction in Uganda, 1971–79," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 7, no. 1 (2013): 116–17; Nelson Kasfir, "State, Magendo, and Class Formation in Uganda," *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 21, no. 3 (1983): 84–103; Reginald Green, *Magendo in the Political Economy of Uganda* (Sussex: IDS Publications, 1981); Mahmood Mamdani, *Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983), 51–54.

misgovernance, there was considerable disengagement and popular flight from officialdom: subsistence farming grew in importance as cash crop margins were squeezed, smugglers subverted government rules, and others fled the country entirely to avoid the capriciousness of the ruling faction.¹⁹

Yet, there were also widespread calls for government to rectify the unavailability of goods. Very often, demands for improved market governance took the form of accusations that compatriots were acting improperly. Many allegations were forwarded to local officials; some were addressed directly to Idi Amin. But what, exactly, was to blame for their economic woes was not entirely clear. As a result, accusations coursed through public life in the 1970s, as bureaucrats and police, farmers and workers, families and neighbors tried to correct an economic order gone awry.²⁰ Sometimes, they could be so numerous as to overwhelm the state: early in his tenure, Amin upbraided Baganda for proliferating accusations “based on personal grudges, political differences, land disputes and other personal conflicts.”²¹ Over time, generalized misgivings were channeled into more targeted suspicions, especially as allegations were circulated in petitions and letters which urged the state to act.²² As anthropologists have argued, accusations are valuable evidence for “the political, economic and ideological factors that shape people’s ethical worldviews.”²³ As such, accusations have certain regularities and patterns, with targets not evenly distributed across the population. Uganda’s Asian community was perhaps the target of the most sustained opprobrium, and a longer tradition blamed them for shuttling money out of the country and cheating customers.²⁴ The racialized resentments that culminated in 1972 are emblematic of the sorts of “ugly emotions” on which the anthropology of accusation focuses. But with their expulsion in 1972, accusations were redirected at men with distributional power: bureaucrats were reported for embezzling public funds, schoolmasters were said to be hoarding supplies, and shopkeepers were decried for refusing to sell at official prices.

But it was not only greed and envy that motivated Ugandans. As Holly Hanson recently described the 1970s, it was not only “self-interest” that prevailed; many Ugandans insisted on reciprocity and “a sense of responsibility for a community beyond themselves.”²⁵ Her argument aligns with the discussion below, but in contrast to her emphasis on the importance of good governance, I focus more on how Ugandans were motivated by a range of moral ideas related to distribution, domesticity, and consumption. I show how Ugandan behavior was shaped by ideas about mutual obligation, dignity, and status. Many thought the economic situation impeded these ethical expectations and they called on the state to facilitate their pursuit.

The purposeful engagement of the state by citizens — and the popular ethics revealed — are the focus of what follows. Ugandans called on officialdom to rectify shortages not least because the postcolonial state had adopted and expanded a series of parastatal organizations that were responsible for doling out foreign exchange, managing the distribution of consumer goods, and exporting the results of peasant

¹⁹Kevin P. Donovan. “Magendo: Arbitrage and Ambiguity on an East African Frontier,” *Cultural Anthropology* 36, no. 1 (2021): 110–37.

²⁰Derek Peterson and Edgar Taylor, “Rethinking the State in Idi Amin’s Uganda: The Politics of Exhortation,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 7, no. 1 (2013): 58–82.

²¹“Opening of Conference of Buganda Elders, 5 August 1971” in Idi Amin, *Speeches by His Excellency the President, General Idi Amin Dada* (Entebbe: Government Printer, 1973).

²²On letters and petitions, see Nana Osei-Opare, “If You Trouble a Hungry Snake, You Will Force It to Bite You”: Rethinking Postcolonial African Archival Pessimism, Worker Discontent, and Petition Writing in Ghana, 1957–66,” *The Journal of African History* 62, no. 1 (2021): 59–78. Daniel Branch. “Public Letters and the Culture of Politics in Kenya, c.1960–75,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 15, no. 2 (2021), 339–57; Rohit De and Robert Travers, “Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (2019): 1–20.

²³Geoffrey Hughes, Megnaa Mehhta, Chiara Bresciani, and Stuart Strange, “Ugly Emotions and the Politics of Accusation,” *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 37, no. 2 (2019): 1.

²⁴Edgar Taylor, “Claiming Kabale: Racial Thought and Urban Governance in Uganda,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 7, no. 1 (2013): 143–63

²⁵Holly Hanson, *To Speak and Be Heard: Seeking Good Governance in Uganda* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2022), 165–66.

cultivators. Citizens saw bureaucrats as incompetent, negligent, or self-serving. Shelves stood empty, depriving households of sugar, salt, and cooking fat. For Ugandans, the dearth of what was known as “essential commodities” was not so much a threat to survival; nor was it a mere inconvenience.²⁶ Rather, people were upset by the way shortages impeded domestic rhythms and social life. Weddings could not take place without oil in which to cook the food; without sugar, ordinary consumption — the afternoon respite of tea or a kindness offered to guests — was likewise offended. Scarcity, in other words, interfered with respectability and hospitality. In an economy where many retained land from which to produce subsistence crops, the category “essential commodities” named the sorts of purchases deemed crucial to the maintenance of a decent meal, a proper visit, and a respectable wedding.

The situation was all the more galling because the 1970s were defined not by absolute absence. Rather, the economy was one of relative deprivation, as access to essential commodities dramatized the inequalities of the era. By 1974, the academic Semakula Kiwanuka recalled, senior government and university officials qualified for rice, sugar, and milk “without struggle and at normal prices,” but most Ugandans lacked inclusion in official hierarchies. Their “children, I felt, needed milk as much as mine.”²⁷ Sometimes the trouble was one of timeliness: teachers, agricultural extension officers, and government employees complained they could not wait in line for goods without neglecting their professional duties. For other Ugandans, the obstacles were a lack of meaningful connections: only those with reliable contacts in the state or subterranean networks could count on acquiring what spare commodities did exist. Those with connections were often uncredentialed northerners or Muslims, and the frustrations about relative exclusion from commodity circuits could reflect the depreciation of historical networks and investments anchored in Uganda’s south. For many others, the whole matter was exceedingly complex, with goods available according to plans and dictates they could not fathom. To be sure, there was considerable scarcity and some goods were truly absent from Uganda, but what animated — even incensed — people was the unequal access to the sort of commodities that made possible a decent life and respectable status. The perceived material inequalities encouraged denunciation and allegation.

Not all Ugandans were able to call on the state to improve distribution: the newly available evidence used here suggests that men were particularly apt to issue petitions and accusations. Partly, this reflects inequalities of literacy and ability to navigate the protocols of public authority. But it is also because the 1970s economic disarray threatened masculine notions of consumption in which household patriarchs were a fulcrum between the domestic and public realms — a channel through which resources flowed. As scholars of Ugandan women’s experience in the 1970s have noted, “gender was a crucial organizing factor within Amin’s military state” and the country’s declining economic status compelled women to engage new commercial activities.²⁸ I make a connected point about how men’s moral economic expectations changed and with what consequences. I emphasize that the relative absence of essential commodities interfered with the achievement of respectable male adulthood, not least in their inability to host culturally salient rites such as wedding parties.²⁹

To be sure, not all allegations concerned economic rules. Being denounced as a political subversive, for instance, was common and enormously damaging.³⁰ Nor did all accusations of economic

²⁶See the discussion in Alicia Decker, “An Accidental Liberation: Ugandan Women on the Front Lines of Idi Amin’s Economic War,” *Women’s History Review* 22, no. 6 (2013): 961–64

²⁷Semakula Kiwanuka, *Amin and the Tragedy of Uganda* (Munich: Weltforum Verlag, 1979), 95–96.

²⁸Decker, *Amin’s Shadow*, 5; Nakanyike Musisi, “Baganda Women’s Night Market Activities,” in *African Market Women and Economic Power*, eds. Bessie House-Mudamba and Felix Ekechi (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995); Christine Obbo, “Sexuality and Economic Domination in Uganda,” in *Woman-Nation-State*, eds. Nira Yuval-Davis, Floya Anthias, and Jo Campling (London: Macmillan 1989): 85–86; Decker, “Accidental Liberation.”

²⁹Lisa Lindsay and Stephen Miescher, *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).

³⁰In another context of fragmented sovereignty, Louisa Lombard similarly foregrounds the work of denunciations. “Denouncing Sovereignty: Claims to Liberty in Northeastern Central African Republic,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, no. 4 (2018): 1066–95.

misdeeds carry the same implications. When newspapers inveighed against economic criminality and chiefs took to radio to condemn farmers for insufficiently producing export crops, it did not carry a direct personal threat. In contrast, those suspected of theft by undisciplined, trigger-happy soldiers had unproven accusations immediately translated into a death sentence. Among the most prominent was Amin's ally, the Englishman Robert Astles, who ran an anti-smuggling operation that was notorious for chasing smugglers around Lake Victoria and accused of killing those it caught.

For its part, the Economic Crimes Tribunal that ensnared Biryeri and Batambuze turned accusations into indictments. The 1975 decree authorized innumerable police investigations and arrests. Very quickly, specialized courts filled with citizens indicted for mis-pricing bread, hoarding cooking oil, and smuggling coffee. State violence was a profound threat here, as well, and Ugandans recognized the scales of economic justice were tilted in favor of those whose connections to Amin immunized them from prosecution. However, although the public could attend these trials, they were not all pre-ordained show trials. Accusations of economic misdeeds that were routed through the court had dynamics of their own. What is clear from the court cases discussed below is that this particular form of legal accusation carried conventions and commitments that allowed some Ugandans to navigate their way through the threat, with charges dropped or the most extreme punishments avoided.

Time Poverty, Commodity Shortages, and Declarations of Dependence

In October 1973, R. W. Kasozi wrote to government on behalf of the registered trade unions in Jinja. Kasozi and his colleagues found themselves in need. Spending most of their days in "the field," meant they had little time to "run back into town and find sugar still being sold to the public." In ordinary circumstances, their work presented little obstacle to necessary errands, yet these were no ordinary times. "It must have also come to your notice," he wrote, "that people leave their villages early in the morning hours and invade the Jinja town, for nothing but sugar." What sugar was available flew off the shelves, meaning trade union staff were confronted by empty shops when they finished work. Some were even prioritizing sugar over their professional duties. "Our minds having been diverted to hunting for sugar, the organization work is being hampered and this is indeed detrimental to the interests of our members to whom we are obligated to serve." If the trade unions around Jinja were to carry on, they would need 200 kilograms of sugar delivered at regular intervals.³¹

The predicament of trade union organizers was, in part, a problem of time poverty. For employed Ugandans like Kasozi, the time-discipline of work interfered with the demands of finding essential commodities. In contrast, as Ato Quayson notes, the unemployed have an abundance of "free time," and in times of shortages this can be spent waiting.³² As queues became commonplace, snaking around street corners in the hope of getting scarce goods, those unable to wait stood little chance of securing their share.³³ The staff of the Kyembogo Tractor Hire Service also found themselves in the wrong place when shelves were stocked. Penning a letter to the District Commissioner for Toro, they positioned themselves as fruitful contributors to agricultural productivity in need of sugar, salt, soap, and hoes. "We cannot leave work when sugar etc. [are] supplied in the town, as we are in the field operating. Sir, could you be so kind enough to get us the above mentioned" commodities?³⁴ When Kasozi wrote of villagers "invading" Jinja to queue for sugar, he suggested a more general resentment by wage workers who found their incomes insufficient in an economy that demanded

³¹JDA Trade and Industry 17/15, R. W. Kasozi to Regional Labour Officer, 22 Oct. 1973.

³²Ato Quayson. *Oxford Street, Accra: Street Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Peterson emphasizes the "pressing imposition [on bureaucrats'] time" during this period. Peterson, "Government work," 628.

³³On queuing, see Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002): 46–48; Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996): 46–50.

³⁴Kabarole District Archive, Fort Portal (KDA) 744/1, Kyembogo Tractor Hire Service Unit to D.C., Toro, 31 July 1975.

timeliness, not merely money.³⁵ They spent the day waiting in a queue only to come back “empty handed, disappointed, and tired.”³⁶ For these constituents, consumption was a competitive affair, with their own deprivation standing in contrast to the acquisitions of less deserving others. Rather than absent, commodities like sugar had a spectral, fleeting presence — available momentarily, or through exclusionary channels. The result was all the more affecting. Not only did it conjure envy and resentment, but the transitory availability of goods compelled more laborious efforts to buy them.

One result was that Ugandans implored bureaucrats to meet their obligations, drawing on hierarchical idioms about duties and rights. These were not abstract entitlements but concrete relations that were historically salient and could further specific notions of what was proper and desirable. Historians of central Uganda have been especially alert to these hierarchical relations of regard and resource distribution in the pre-independence era, and they continued to shape behavior in an era of misrule.³⁷ In a related vein, James Ferguson has written of the “declarations of dependence” through which many Africans make claims on the resources of the better off.³⁸ For instance, when B. O. Lumonya, the Commissioner for Education in Busoga Province, wrote to the Governor seeking sugar for teachers, his request was deferential, emphasizing the appreciation and gratitude of the deprived. “I am sorry for bothering you on school matters,” Lumonya hesitated, but “as the father of the Province,” it was to the Governor that he must turn.³⁹ In practice, access to commodities was not a right inhering on the basis of citizenship alone; instead, applicants needed to justify the basis for their legitimacy through a combination of rightful dependency and productive worth. Kasozi, for instance, did not make his claim on behalf of his rights as a citizen of Uganda in general, but rather as a contributor to the well-being of a specific constituency: trade union members based in Jinja. An equitable distribution of commodities was untenable, so Ugandans positioned themselves as especially worthy — as figurative sons, productive union organizers, and so forth. In the process, they differentiated citizenship through their own idioms of claims-making.⁴⁰

Attending to allegations, indictments, and petitions in their various forms reveals the ethical sensibilities that were offended by economic volatility and shortage. Implicit theories about the relationship between labor and worthiness were tested by commodity shortages: cotton and coffee farmers — who “generate the foreign exchange of the country” — could not buy materials from shops due to the distances from their rural plots. This, insisted Governor Owor of Western Province, required government reform.⁴¹ Others demonstrate conflicting ideas about whether individual identity should affect consumption: residents of Bugoye Sub-County complained that the wholesaler for sugar, textile, and hoes was causing the common man to suffer because “he uses a lot of nepotism, going as far as first looking at somebody’s face to see” whose brother or sister

³⁵In other cases, it was rural Ugandans who suffered: when shops were only open in the morning, they may not arrive “all the way from up-country” in time to secure some stock. KDA 638 Minutes of the Minister of Commerce’s Meeting with Direct Importers, 25 Sep. 1975.

³⁶KDA 744/1, Rukara to Manager, Food and Beverages, 20 Oct. 1975.

³⁷See Carol Summers, “Radical Rudeness: Ugandan Social Critiques in the 1940s,” *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 3 (2006): 741–70; Carol Summers, “Grandfathers, Grandsons, Morality, and Radical Politics in Late Colonial Buganda,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 38 no. 3 (2005): 427–47; Holly Hanson, *Landed Obligation: The Practice of Power in Buganda* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003); Hanson, *To Speak*. For a recent ethnographic assessment, see China Sherz, *Having People, Having Heart: Charity, Sustainable Development, and Problems of Dependence in Central Uganda* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

³⁸James Ferguson, “Declarations of Dependence: Labour, Personhood, and Welfare in Southern Africa,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 2 (2013): 223–42.

³⁹JDA Trade and Industry 17/15, Essential Commodities for Teachers in Jinja, 1 Oct. 1975.

⁴⁰Emma Hunter, ed., *Citizenship, Belonging, and Political Community in Africa: Dialogues between Past and Present* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

⁴¹KDA 402/1, Owor to Marketing Manager, National Textiles Board, 6 June 1977.

they are.⁴² Customers, these petitioners insisted, should be free from the logics of kinship and clan.

Citizen petitions reveal a diverse range of priorities and legitimating discourses. Some followed the logic of the nation, claiming that queuing would “waste indefinite and valuable time which we would otherwise put to the public disposal.”⁴³ Military reservists complained they had not received sugar, salt, and cloth for three months. They were concentrating on doubling agricultural production — “dedicated to our service” — but needed the state to rectify this “malpractice.”⁴⁴ For his part, Governor Owor negotiated dearth by categorizing and ranking citizens: productive contributors to the foreign exchange reserve were prioritized over others.⁴⁵ The few expatriates that remained in positions of importance — doctors, for instance, or technicians at a cement factory — were also granted special dispensations.⁴⁶ The logics of prioritized access also obliged recipients to be sufficiently appreciative: without gratitude, one could suddenly be detached from the networks of allocation. For example, Rashid Kwebiha invoked the ire of the County Chief after complaining about the paltry amount of sugar he received. Docking his allocation for ingratitude, the Chief cautioned him further: “If you cannot accept that free offer, then you will have helped the rest who have never even seen half a kg.”⁴⁷ Here, the decentralized despotism adopted by the postcolonial state showed its distributive force and its demand for acquiescence.⁴⁸ It also reveals the zero-sum sensibility of the time: sugar in one man’s tea was responsible for depriving another. As a result, a sense of entitlement merged with the necessity of opportunistic supplication.

These petitions were often alert to Ugandans’ ability to vote with their feet, for if mutual obligations were not met, the claimants would make do otherwise. Teachers threatened to leave the classroom if government did not divert sugar, salt, and soap to schools.⁴⁹ Three hundred workers at the Toro Growers’ Co-operative Union could not travel the twenty-two kilometers to the nearest shops “to line up when goods are available,” so appealed for a special allocation.⁵⁰ Without it, they would not appear for work. Absconding workers threatened far more than their bosses’ bottom line. As the country’s output groaned to a halt, queuing was seen as a threat to the entire nation. “Government is very much concerned with the shortage of labour,” Governor Owor explained when speaking of queuing tea laborers, leading to “a considerable amount of loss in terms of foreign exchange.”⁵¹ The trouble was urgent: tea harvesting “is a non-stop type of job” because it is most valuable if the leaves are picked when green. Without more workers, the plants would decay, earning less as a result. Soap, sugar, and salt were key to morale and an “inducement to workers for double production.”⁵²

The Ethics of Essential Commodities

In interviews and across archives, “sugar” stands as the most salient absence of the period, followed by salt, soap, and cooking oil. In the decades prior, sugar consumption grew significantly in

⁴²KDA 654/2, People of Bugoye Sub-County to the D.C. Rwenzori, 19 Sep. 1975.

⁴³KDA 744/1, Kagaba and Nyakabwa, Advocates to D.C. Toro, 22 Sep. 1975.

⁴⁴KDA 654, Dominic Mayanja to Governor, Western Province, 19 Oct. 1977.

⁴⁵KDA 628/2, Memorandum on Problems Affecting Industries in Western Province, 24 Feb. 1976. On the importance of foreign exchange, see Kevin P. Donovan, *Money, Value, and the State: Sovereignty and Citizenship in East Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2024).

⁴⁶KDA 744/1, Essential Commodities for Buhinga Hospital Medical Expatriates, 30 Oct. 1975; KDA 654, Commodities for Expatriates, 11 Mar. 1978.

⁴⁷KDA 654, County Chief to Rashid Kwebiha, 4 Dec. 1975.

⁴⁸Decentralized despotism is Mamdani’s term for the unaccountable authority and “day-to-day violence” of chiefs under indirect rule. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 22–23.

⁴⁹JDA Trade and Industry 17/15, Provincial Commissioner for Education to Provincial Governor, Busoga, 1 Oct. 1975.

⁵⁰KDA 654/1, Essential Commodities for Workers, Toro Growers’ Co-operative Union, 11 Apr. 1978.

⁵¹KDA 651/2, Alex Owor to General Manager, Foods and Beverages, 10 Feb. 1977.

⁵²KDA 628/2, Provincial Executive Secretary to Minister of Industry and Power, 24 Feb. 1976.

Uganda, not merely for its flavor or calories but because it formed a basis for newly important rites. The performance of respectability by individuals and households came to hinge on the availability of tea with a heaping addition of sugar. In part, this reflected a colonial transformation, in which elite sociability between Baganda and British occurred over tea.⁵³ In part, it was a missionary influence, in which ceremonial consumption of alcohol was displaced by more sober, sweeter stuff.⁵⁴ And in part, it reflected Protectorate era policies to encourage “native consumption” in order to boost the Uganda sugar industry.⁵⁵ As a result, consumption that began as a distinctive pleasure at the pinnacle of an unequal society was, by the time of independence, a common habit.⁵⁶ In the 20 years after the end of the Second World War, consumption increased 70 times, and already by 1960, Uganda’s per capita sugar consumption was the highest in East Africa.⁵⁷ In 1972, an industry estimate had Ugandans consuming an annual thirteen tonnes per thousand people compared to eleven tonnes per thousand in Ghana (a country with twice the per capita income).⁵⁸

Yet, in the years after 1972, both production and consumption collapsed. The domestic sugar industry produced 73,800 tonnes in 1973; five years later, it was only 8,000 tonnes. One estimate had Ugandans consuming 6.8kg each in 1973; by 1978, it was down to 0.3kg.⁵⁹ What sugar did exist was more expensive: a 1975 accounting found a kilogram of sugar going for thirty shillings instead of the mandated price of seven shillings.⁶⁰ The absence of sugar interfered with the pursuit of social standing and ethical life. Other goods — bicycles and hoes, for instance — were also difficult to acquire in the 1970s but did not reach the same emotional stature. In the idiom of the time, “essential commodities” were not so much those essential for life as they were essential for a bare minimum of the *good* life. After all, you can drink tea without sugar. From the perspective of many, however, you cannot drink tea without sugar in a dignified manner.⁶¹ What Ugandans called “essential commodities” were conduits for fulfilling ideas about how a good life should be made. Far from inert implements of survival, they were objects of meaningful significance in the raising of children, the hosting of guests, and the fashioning of oneself.⁶²

Sugar, salt, soap, and cooking oil were essential commodities because their absence deprived Ugandans of respectability. Piled into hot tea, sugar is not merely a desired flavor but also a constitutive part of domestic rhythms, including hospitality. What calories it provides are coupled with its symbolic role in social life. While improvised substitutes were possible — pounded sugar cane for sweetener, or pawpaw leaves for washing clothes — these were hardly sufficient.⁶³ Those I interviewed near the Kenyan border considered themselves “fortunate,” noting that “the rest of the

⁵³On notions of hospitality and sociability in Buganda, and how those are mediated by food and drink, see Carol Summers, “Radical Rudeness.”

⁵⁴Christine Obbo writes of the “conspicuous consumption displayed at Church weddings” where tea and, by the 1950s, soft drinks became expected performances of prestige. *African Women: Their Struggles for Economic Independence* (London: Zed Books, 1980), 37–38.

⁵⁵D. P. S. Ahluwalia, *Plantations and the Politics of Sugar in Uganda* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1995), 38.

⁵⁶A downward diffusion common across countries, according to Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

⁵⁷Ahluwalia, *Plantations*, 161–62.

⁵⁸A. M. O’Connor, “Sugar in Tropical Africa,” *Geography* 60, no. 1 (1975): 25.

⁵⁹Ahluwalia, *Plantations*, 199.

⁶⁰Republic of Uganda, *The Action Programme: A Three-Year Economic Rehabilitation Plan* (Entebbe: Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, 1977), 57.

⁶¹At the very least, doing so marked you as an oddity: shortly after independence, journalists noted with curiosity that Duncan Sandys, Secretary of State for the Colonies and Commonwealth Relations, took his tea without sugar during a 1963 visit. Makerere University Library, “UPC demonstrate as Sandys arrives,” *Uganda Nation*, 1 Mar. 1963.

⁶²Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁶³Emmanuel Katongole, *A Future for Africa: Critical Essays in Christian Social Imagination* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 17.

people in the country would admire some of us who were at the border, because when it came to sugar, we could easily get it.”⁶⁴

The distributional changes had particularly gendered implications. For husbands and fathers, the inability to secure essential commodities was unnerving. Teachers at the Nyakagongo Primary School bemoaned that the portion of sugar they received was “inadequate for a family man.”⁶⁵ What offended the most was that sugar was not completely absent; rather, it was relatively unavailable. As a group of teachers in Lira wrote of the “unfair” situation, they were suffering “not because the commodities are not there, but mainly because most of the commodities that come are diverted to [the] black market” by unscrupulous officials. The “meagre” quantities they received were an impediment to appropriate decorum and unbecoming their professional standing.⁶⁶ The singer Aloyzio Nyago dramatized the masculine anxiety in his song called “Magendo” from 1974–75. Bemoaning that “this world is a very tough place” with families in need, he sang about how “running a home is very hard.” After each of Nyago’s lines, a woman’s voice exhorted him to “work hard” to provide, even if it required turning to magendo.⁶⁷

As the male wage earner’s entitlement became more uncertain, women were especially vulnerable.⁶⁸ This was of heightened importance for women who were less able to position themselves as contributors to the nation or to draw on institutional connections. Alicia Decker shows that Ugandan women expanded their commercial roles in the wake of the Asian expulsion, not least to acquire goods inaccessible otherwise. The obligations of social reproduction brought more women into marketplaces to cook food, sell vegetables, and even smuggle scarce commodities. As many told her, “Amin taught us how to work,” meaning they experienced the 1970s as a new opportunity and compulsion to earn an income through means both legal and otherwise.⁶⁹ Likewise, Nakanyike Musisi argues that women operated “aggressive minicapitalist ventures” in order to cope with economic transformation in the decade. These enterprises provided “some semblance of freedom from dependence on male relatives,” she writes, though in a context of precarity and gendered suspicion.⁷⁰

Petitions for essential commodities drew on various idioms of supplication, legitimation, and threat in an attempt to receive essential commodities for everyday purposes. Those discussed above justified their requests with regard to national productivity, individual contributions, and notions of fairness. Others appealed for essential commodities in order to mark special occasions. For instance, the family of a woman who unexpectedly died in April 1975 delivered a handwritten note to the Governor of Busoga from their village, Bukonte, some 75 kilometers away. “We request your Excellency to grant us a bag of sugar, some soap and salt which we are to use on next Saturday for traditional functions,” they wrote, adding — almost as an afterthought — that they would also need three bags of cement for the tomb.⁷¹ Primary in their petition were the goods to appropriately host funeral attendees; secondary were the things needed for the deceased. Such requests were not unique: a year later, the national food and beverages distributor complained it was besieged by “members of the public who always come for commodities claiming that they are [a] funeral right.”⁷²

⁶⁴Interview with J. W., Mbale, Uganda, 15 Feb. 2017.

⁶⁵KDA 744/1, Nyakagongo Primary School Staff to Saza Chief, 25 June 1975.

⁶⁶Lira District Archives (LDA) Box 501: Moses C. Otyek-Akeny to Minister of Commerce, 20 Nov. 1979. I appreciate Derek Peterson sharing this letter with me and discussing the importance of sugar to notions of respectability.

⁶⁷Michiel van Oosterhout, *The Soul of Uganda Through Song: An Alternative History Book* (Kampala: African Studies Bookstore, 2022): 118–22.

⁶⁸Decker, *Amin’s Shadow*, ch. 4; Grace B. Kyomuhendo and Marjorie K. McIntosh, *Women, Work, and Domestic Virtue in Uganda, 1900–2003* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006).

⁶⁹Decker, “An Accidental Liberation,” 964.

⁷⁰Musisi, “Baganda Women’s Night Market Activities.”

⁷¹JDA 17/15, [Illegible] to Governor, Busoga Province, 7 Apr. 1975.

⁷²JDA Trade and Industry 9/17, Foods and Beverages Monthly Report for April 1976.

Rites of initiation like funerals and weddings are prototypical moments for the making of kin and community, as well as the collective circulation and redistribution of wealth and property. Government controls obliged Ugandans to incorporate the state in these rituals. Saving money to provide for wedding guests was difficult enough during these years; for those that could accumulate some cash, the inability to purchase sugar, salt, soap, and oil was even more troubling.⁷³ In the days leading up to his son's wedding, Mr. Yusufu of Jinja appeared in the office of the Provincial Governor bearing both the wedding invitations and a letter of introduction from his District Commissioner. With this documentary accoutrement, Yusufu hoped to acquire beer, flour, cigarettes, and rice to host his guests.⁷⁴ Such a predicament also confronted John Baptist Musana, who requested to purchase 200 cases of beer, gin, and soda after "having decided to have a Holy Marriage on Catholic Centenary day." This proud occasion would take place at the Nalugi Parish and his father-in-law's home. "The donation of the wedding," he explained, would occur on 1 October 1978, with contributions from his wife's family, his own clan, and his best friends. But,

the donors are anxious to see that this request is approved in a fatherly manner, before or as soon as after the above mentioned date. It will enable me to be buying few by few cases from the money which will be donated generously towards the wedding.

Please, he asked the Provincial Governor, would you meet my request "with fatherly consideration to enable me to have a colourful, peaceful, brotherly wedding, on the most important day in Uganda for my faith?"⁷⁵ On the other side of the country, Solomon Kasaija-Atwooki faced particular pressure at his wedding: his born-again in-laws who would not partake in the usual homemade alcohol but instead wished for tea with plenty of sugar and an additional bag of sugar as part of the bride price.⁷⁶ He could provide the homebrewed alcohol by himself, but sugar was impossible to self-provision. As a result, the groom was obliged to ask state officials for assistance.⁷⁷ Men like these did not only forge new families at weddings; scarcity also obliged them to cast the state as an additional father figure.⁷⁸

Absence, Suspicion, and Commerce

Facing an unaccountable commercial world — with commodities slipping out of controlled channels into illegible, exclusionary circuits — citizens called on the state to discipline the market. They cast a suspicious eye on neighbors and the movement of goods. There was widespread consensus that the essential commodity shortages were due to hoarding and smuggling, even if this behavior usually escaped observation. Absence was its own sort of evidence: when goods were not available, it was presumed they were being sold illicitly. Complaints against "notorious traders" would pile up, spurring investigation and sometimes administrative responses.⁷⁹ If in earlier decades, "the national economy" became an object of technocratic knowledge and bureaucratic regulation, the situation of the 1970s called for a more precise government of value.⁸⁰ Abstractions like inflation and growth

⁷³KDA 654, Letter from Benjamin Bogere, Jr. re: Michael Mpuro Ibanda, 8 May 1978.

⁷⁴JDA Trade and Industry 11/17, Request for Commodities, 20 Mar. 1978.

⁷⁵KDA 654, John Baptist Musana to Provincial Governor, 1 Sep. 1978.

⁷⁶KDA 654, Solomon Kasaija-Atwooki to General Manager, National Sugar Works, 7 June 1978..

⁷⁷Likewise, among Samburu in northern Kenya, sugary, milky tea is central to diets, "everyday sociability, and... virtually all ritual occasions." In fact, ceremonies may be delayed if there is insufficient sugar for properly sweet tea. Jon Holtzman, "In a Cup of Tea: Commodities and History among Samburu Pastoralists in Northern Kenya," *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 1 (2003): 144.

⁷⁸On the politics of fathers, family, and food, see Michael Schatzberg, *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

⁷⁹JDA Trade and Industry 23/3, Commissioner for Commerce, Mbale to D.C. South Busoga, 18 Sep. 1975.

⁸⁰Timothy Mitchell, "Fixing the Economy," *Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (1998): 82–101. Alden Young, *Transforming Sudan: Decolonization, Economic Development, and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

receded in importance as the particularities of pricing, the itineraries of key goods, and shopkeepers' displays emerged as targets of popular demands for policing.

Ugandans often accused those with special status of economic criminality. Licensed importers were allocated foreign currency only to sell the goods in neighboring countries and bank their proceeds abroad.⁸¹ An aggrieved employee of the South Bunyoro District Administration begged the central government to send a fact finding team to "save the public funds being so savagely consumed" by his conniving colleagues. These "racketeers" were using false requests for spare parts to acquire money for their own use, including "quick-paying magendo." Without actual spare parts, only one vehicle was available for collecting agricultural products from distant rural areas; the bureaucratic crooks were buying cheaply and selling in Hoima town "at magendo prices" by monopolizing this transportation. As a result, the "common man is to suffer because of some few greedy elements" who have privileged, but improper, access to currency.⁸²

Ugandans volunteered their services to stop smuggling. A group of former soldiers tried to parlay their prior "intelligence work" and "high training in investigations" into a new commission with the military. In a letter seeking an audience with Idi Amin, they laid out their plan. As the "eyes and ears of the government," they could help stop "subversive" economic crimes through "special duties on borders and boundaries." Such an offer was not without their own purpose; enlisting as soldiers in the Economic War was a way to display their outstanding virtues as citizens. The same soldiers had earlier applied to the Economic War Allocation Committee for a maize mill and, before that, for a tea estate. "To get a bank loan of sufficient money to run a business or buy a lorry would be another topic to discuss with Amin," they wrote.⁸³

Some demands for economic policing were born of competitive spirits. Mahmood Mamdani traced the roots of the Asian expulsion to the maneuvering of the African petit bourgeoisie.⁸⁴ Facing the commercial dominance of Asian capitalists, the petit bourgeoisie harnessed state power to advance their own aspirations. The dynamics of this racial capitalism were on full display in a lengthy letter sent to Idi Amin by "The Native of the Land, Ugandan Traders of Busoga District" at the start of August 1972. "You promised ACTION, and... so also, ACTION we PROMISE in return." Expressing their affection and love for the new military government and its boss, the missive detailed an incredible range of demands that would help the "African Ugandan Traders." They argued that government was responsible for ending their marginalization at the hands of "non-citizen trickster[s]," suggesting rent controls and preferential government tenders, commercial training, and access to loans. It was to the citizen — depicted as autochthonous and productive — that government was responsible, and the traders happily positioned themselves in a relationship of dependence to the sovereign. Mimicking the Lord's Prayer, they entreated "Your Excellency, relieve us from evils of Exploitation in Trade, preserve us in Commerce and Industry, and deliver us into the Fruits of INDEPENDENCE and everlasting PROSPERITY."⁸⁵

The demands for economic policing were not limited to racialized struggles. It also existed among African merchants. In 1976, the Kagadi Traders Committee blew the whistle on the wholesale distribution agent for textiles, personally naming his three "black market agents" who were busy selling fabric at inflated prices. Such malfeasance took place under cover of darkness so in the morning you would find no textiles in the shops. While shelves of upstanding shopkeepers were empty, the three illicit merchants were always supplied with "rolls and rolls" of printed textiles. "Do these people make [the fabric] themselves? Help us. They are milking us terribly."⁸⁶ Others

⁸¹JDA Trade and Industry 17/15, Minister of Commerce to G.M. Foods and Beverages. 26 Sep. 1975.

⁸²KDA 401, Sylvanus Peter Kabajambe to Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Provincial Administration. 4 Oct. 1977.

⁸³KDA 480/2, Permission to Visit H.E. Field Marshal, Dr. Amin, VC, DSO, MC, The Life President of Uganda, 30 Nov. 1976.

⁸⁴Mahmood Mamdani, *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

⁸⁵JDA Trade and Industry 14/25, The Natives of the Land, Ugandan Traders of Busoga District to Idi Amin, 8 Aug. 1972.

⁸⁶KDA 641/2, Kagadi Traders Committee to Governor Western Province, 2 Jan. 1976.

complemented their accusations and complaints with detailed lists of suggested reforms. A twenty-six page memorandum submitted to Idi Amin by African traders decried nepotism, “briefcase businessmen,” and the usual slate of economic criminality. They asked for further training, for the exclusion of unlicensed competitors, for reformed commodity distribution protocols, and for changes to the government’s pricing formulae.⁸⁷

Many complaints blamed merchants. In 1972, residents of Kichwamba Gomborra complained that they “shoulder expensive prices from traders, butchers, and shopkeepers.” The accused shopkeepers contravened regulations for measuring sugar, using old scales instead of the newer kilogram standards.⁸⁸ A stream of such complaints about economic crimes reached government offices in the 1970s. In July 1976, the “People of Jinja Town” wrote a letter to the Managing Director of Uganda Bata Shoe Company, excoriating the “Lady Manager” of their shop on Jinja’s Main Road. When “she receives shoes or sandals/slippers, she just hides them and instead sells them at ‘MAGENDO’ price in her stand (Mudaala) which is in Jinja Market.” Please take action, they implored, “because we are suffering a lot; e.g., Slippers to be sold at Shs.50/- a pair !!!!!”⁸⁹ Elsewhere, 15 residents of Muhokya Busongora reported a Mr. Joseph Wagiraga for misappropriating Ush. 2,800 and 98 bags of cement, leading to his arrest.⁹⁰ “The People of Budondo” wrote a secret letter accusing a merchant of “stealing the government’s money” by renting out rooms in a property acquired from the Custodian Board.⁹¹ They begged local government to “send some spies to find out the truth.” In few cases could allegations be proven, but suspicion and accusation had their own efficacy, spurring Ugandans to further retreat from spaces of public scrutiny and to preemptively guard against unwanted trouble. Traders in Kibaale County closed up shop when soldiers from nearby barracks began checking prices and demanding evidence of where they acquired the goods.⁹² The effect of such discretion and secrecy was to make an already uncertain commercial realm even less perceptible.

Throughout these complaints, Ugandans revealed an expectation that government could install an ethical regime of commodity distribution. Fair prices were those set by the state, even if few were unable to avoid buying goods at magendo prices during the 1970s. Allocation was to be decided on logics other than those of a marketplace, where ability to pay determines who can purchase a good; rather, many Ugandans thought commodities like sugar and salt should be available widely and more specialized goods — say, bicycles or spare vehicle parts — should be sold to those who would use them for productive purposes, such as roaming agricultural extension agents or coffee transporters. Even Kagadi’s jealously competitive traders reflected an ethic of equitable distribution, upset that the textile distributor was giving preferential buying rights to some shopkeepers and not others. They believed the only way to fix the textile system was “to appoint a reliable government agent.”⁹³ Under his watchful eye the wholesale textiles could be opened in the presence of all traders, instead of secretly distributed at night.

In the Matter of Economic Crimes

By and large, citizens’ complaints called for the reformation — not the dissolution — of the state distribution system. During the 1970s, the Ugandan state tried various means to contain wealth within its auspices. Parastatal organizations were formed in response to shortages and dissolved

⁸⁷JDA Trade and Industry 23/3, Traders’ Memorandum submitted to His Excellency Amin on Commercial and Related Economic Activities in Uganda, n.d. [1976 or 1977].

⁸⁸KDA 401/1, Expensive Selling of Meat and Sugar, 27 Aug. 1972.

⁸⁹JDA Complaints and Petitions 4/4, People of Jinja Town to M.D. Uganda Bata Shoe Co., 15 July 1976.

⁹⁰KDA 401, Letter re: Mr. Joseph Wagiraga, 3 June 1971.

⁹¹JDA Admin Complaints and Petitions 4/4, The People of Budondo to District Commissioner, Jinja District, 19 May 1977.

⁹²KDA 466, Behavior of Some Soldiers of Kabamba Army Unit, 2 May 1974.

⁹³KDA 641/2, Kagadi Traders Committee to Governor Western Province, 2 Jan. 1976.

when the problems persisted. Commodity allocation committees drew up lists of goods and recipients, issuing paperwork in triplicate to account for their distribution. District-level officials patrolled shops and reported on-the-ground conditions to their superiors. However, much to the frustration of the state, production, and trade continued to elude their grasp. Worldwide inflation, the oil embargo, and investors' preferences deprived the state of meaningful control over economic dynamics.

Ugandans, for their part, invented novel ways of finding commodities themselves. The examples are myriad, with few initiatives reaching significant scale on their own; rather, a profusion of unsanctioned *magendo* accumulated to tremendous consequence. Eventually, the state developed a more elaborate effort to police economic life, linking chiefs, district administrators, and the national judiciary. Western Province is indicative of how this unfolded. At the start of 1976, Governor Owor called together a dozen security officials in Fort Portal to express his concern about "magendo prices." Police and soldiers were contributing to the malpractice by making purchases at these inflated prices; worse, they had not sufficiently enforced the laws to stop the situation. In response, the security forces promised to "do some homework on the price list of controlled commodities" and begin more regular patrols to check on shop prices.

Similar actions were undertaken across the country, though the police often struggled with their mandate. County chiefs felt powerless without armed patrols to support them.⁹⁴ Even then, success was not guaranteed. In the fishing communities of Sigulu Island, in Lake Victoria, government officials were stymied trying to stop smugglers because word of their arrival preceded them, leading to canoes rushing away toward Kenyan jurisdiction.⁹⁵ When police did maintain the element of surprise it could still result in frantic boat chases across the inland sea. Police in South Busoga, for instance, believed lakeside Lugala village was "the main gate of smugglers" to Kenya. Hiring a canoe one early morning in 1976, they set out to intercept the criminalized cotton trade. Only after a vigorous pursuit — and threatening to shoot — did the suspects stop their boat. Onboard were ten sacks of cotton and five passengers who hailed from the same village where, to the police's frustration, chiefs did nothing to stop smuggling. The police arrested them, unmoved by their pleas that they needed to smuggle in order to buy essential commodities.⁹⁶

Men like these were hauled before the Economic Crimes Tribunal which convened trials across the country where thousands of Ugandans were harangued and punished, often excessively. When it was established in 1975, it reflected a more coercive effort to govern trade by limiting smuggling, hoarding, and the mis-pricing of goods. As the stuff of everyday life was criminalized — from bread to petrol and beyond — some Ugandans were executed; others received lesser sentences. As an exceptional judicial forum for handling an enormous range of cases, the Tribunal was part of what Amnesty International viewed as a wider degradation of the rule of law.⁹⁷ Referring to these Tribunals specifically, the watchdog wrote that "arrest, trial, and sentencing in such cases appear to be excessively arbitrary."⁹⁸ However, the work of the Tribunal was hardly straightforward, and there was a certain ambiguity in its operations. The Tribunal risked publicizing the inconsistencies of the era, not least of which was the utter commonality of the actions it penalized.

⁹⁴JDA Justice, Law, Order, and Security 13/17, County Chief's Office Bunya to D.C. South Busoga, 2 Apr. 1979.

⁹⁵JDA Justice, Law, Order, and Security 13/17, Report Concerning Lolwe Island in Sigulu, Gombolola Bukooli County, 17 June 1975.

⁹⁶JDA Justice, Law, Order, and Security 13/17, Office of the Supt. of Police/Prisons, South Busoga to D.C. South Busoga District, 4 Feb. 1976.

⁹⁷In his memoir, Peter Allen says the military tribunals were introduced because the judiciary (of which he was a senior member in the 1970s) refused to acquiesce to military demands, including on economic crimes. Peter Allen, *Days of Judgment: A Judge in Idi Amin's Uganda* (London: Kimber, 1987), 16, 128–31.

⁹⁸Amnesty International, *Human Rights Violations in Uganda* (London: Amnesty International, 1978), 4–5. However, it was not a wholesale invention of the Amin state, drawing instead on colonial regulations, including price controls. David Killingray and Richard Rathbone, eds., *Africa and the Second World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986); Gardner Thompson, *Governing Uganda: British Colonial Rule and its Legacy* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2003), ch. 10.

Portraying the frequency of economic crimes risked throwing its own work and the wider government into disrepute. While the public could attend — and convictions like Harriet Biryeri's ended in public displays of enforcement — the publicness of the Tribunal was muted in important ways. Moreover, for those involved in the trials, enforcing official rule could be dangerous work, liable to offend violent, unaccountable men. While some *nouveau riche* flaunted their wealth as a demonstration of their extralegal privileges, not all networks of elite affiliation were obvious. Moreover, the highly volatile composition of Amin's circle meant it was not always clear who stood where. Therefore, as Derek Peterson and Richard Vokes note, the photographers who documented economic contraband and suspects alike rarely published their work.⁹⁹

Its indeterminacy also reflected the fact that what counted as an economic crime was not a settled matter, and over time the types of actions adjudicated at the Tribunal grew: Patrick Mugisha was charged with theft while working as a petrol attendant. Corporal F. Okello was remanded for misappropriating money from arrested prisoners. Frederick Seronjogi and two accomplices were arrested for stealing eighty-seven pounds of mercury from Kilembe Mines. Mr. F. Kiiza was charged with using an official rifle for private business.¹⁰⁰ The Economic Crimes Tribunal, in other words, came to subsume existing forms of criminal law, as theft, embezzlement, and public corruption were framed as primarily offenses against the nation and its economy.¹⁰¹

The Economic Crimes Tribunal was not an empty shell over reckless violence. It worked through certain bureaucratic and legal formalities, meaning defendants had certain entitlements and room for maneuver.¹⁰² In practice, the Department of Public Prosecutions investigated cases and made recommendations about moving forward with prosecutions. The Tribunal was chaired by military men with a senior magistrate serving as legal adviser. The Department of Public Prosecutions investigated cases and made nonbinding recommendations about moving forward with prosecutions. The tribunals rotated around the country, sitting for weeks in towns before moving on; one consequence was accused Ugandans could spend a long time in prison without their trial. When Tribunals did meet, results varied. An accurate accounting is difficult to ascertain from available evidence, but there is evidence that in addition to violent punishment and the confiscation of property, accused economic criminals were freed for insufficient evidence, police malpractice, a lack of witness statements, privately amending their wrongs, and other reasons. For instance, in November 1977 the case against Peter Kiiza and eight other defendants was dropped. Kiiza and his colleagues were at the time employed by the North Bunyoro District Administration. When the vehicle they were driving broke down, they allegedly removed seventeen rolls of textiles they were carrying. Rather than being made into school uniforms, the government employees were accused of personally profiting from the underhanded deal. Yet, upon their arrest they were able to collect the equivalent cost of the textiles (a sum of US\$ 9,180), reimburse the District Administration, and satisfy the District Commissioner. Noting this course of events, the Resident Senior State Attorney struck a pragmatic note, recommending the case be dropped on the grounds of insufficient evidence.¹⁰³

Other cases display a sense of judicial evenhandedness before the tribunals sat. Laurentso Takwamu and Olive Kabadeya stood accused in May 1978 of smuggling coffee to Zaire. The Resident State Attorney thought there was insufficient evidence on record to sustain the charge. The accused testified they were only carrying coffee from their uncle's farm to their father who

⁹⁹Derek Peterson and Richard Vokes, *The Unseen Archive of Idi Amin* (London: Prestel Publishing, 2021), 121–22.

¹⁰⁰These cases are available in KDA 39.

¹⁰¹The initial decree was repeatedly amended to expand its remit. Alicia Decker, "Idi Amin's Dirty War: Subversion, Sabotage, and the Battle to Keep Uganda Clean, 1971–1979," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 43, no. 3 (2010): 507.

¹⁰²A point I draw from Samuel Daly, "The Survival Con: Fraud and Forgery in the Republic of Biafra, 1967–70," *The Journal of African History* 58, no. 1 (2017): 129–44.

¹⁰³KDA 39, Masindi Police Criminal Case No.CRB.673/77, 9 Nov. 1977.

would sell it for money for school uniforms.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, a case against Sesiria Mbambu was dropped. While she too was alleged by the local chief to be taking Ugandan coffee to Zaire, she insisted that she was only traveling to a primary society that had cash, as hers was unable to buy her crop and “she wanted the money very badly.” Mbambu’s story was deemed plausible, encouraging the state attorney to drop the case.¹⁰⁵ These court records provide evidence of the limitations of governing through accusation, even in the form of a legal indictment. Allegations were often based on flimsy evidence and compromised loyalties; the accused had room to rebut the contentions, including within the process of exceptional tribunals. And in a context where nearly all Ugandans were obliged to some sort of illegality in order to get by, the *carte blanche* application of the decree’s draconian rule was hardly feasible, let alone an approximation of justice.

The prosecutorial decisions could combine impressionistic and pragmatic reasoning with legal technicalities and an economic sensibility. They may also reflect less aboveboard influence given the stakes involved. James Batekateka was arrested for overcharging while serving as a distribution agent for Nile Breweries in April 1978. Accused of selling beer and whiskey above the allowed prices, Batekateka was let go because the state had failed to follow its own regulatory protocols. As the prosecutor explained, the prices Batekateka charged were simply out of date, and the Minister of Commerce had failed to issue signed statutory instruments updating the new prices. Moreover, the prosecutor stated that the USh. 100 “transport charge” the accused was adding to every crate of beer did not, precisely, contravene the law: as a surcharge and not a price increase, such a margin was not officially illegal under the Economic Crimes Tribunal Decree.¹⁰⁶

Or, consider John Bukenya, whose arrest in December 1977 was by any measure bad luck. The owner of a taxi plying the road between Fort Portal and Kyenjojo, Bukenya was arrested with a jerry can and pipe next to his vehicle when the District Commissioner for Toro just happened to drive by. Bukenya had paid for the fuel in his taxi and explained that the siphoning was only to assist a neighbor who needed enough to get his car to the petrol station. Instead, the two to three liters of petrol were seized as evidence, along with the vehicle and the pipe. Yet, it was not clear any crime had been committed, at least not according to Julious J. Ajudriga, the police officer in charge of the case. The District Commissioner who made the arrest was responding to a radio announcement by Brigadier Isaac Maliyamungu that promised severe penalties for anyone who siphoned petrol and then went to another petrol station to refill it. Yet, as far as Ajudriga could tell, there was no “signed decree” criminalizing such an act.¹⁰⁷ Without this formality, was a crime committed?

The Indeterminacy of Hoarding

The suspicions of the era ensnared many who insisted on their innocence. Jonathan Mukasa was one Ugandan who pleaded for understanding after being arrested for hoarding in September 1973. “I strongly support the Government in punishing hoarders of commodities,” he patriotically announced. A licensed transporter and shopkeeper in Jinja, Mukasa was found by police at 5:30 a.m. with 200 tins of cooking oil in his storehouse. His protests, however, fell on deaf ears as his shop, goods, and lorry were seized and his good name was sullied on a radio broadcast. His lengthy plea for justice insisted there was an error: the 200 tins were, indeed, not meant to be in his store, but his lorry developed mechanical issues on the way from the mill to the State Trading Corporation Depot. Laden with 400 tins of cooking fat, there was no way to winch the vehicle up for inspection without removing half the load. As Mukasa emphasized, he was an exemplary economic citizen, transporting for multiple years not only for the oil mill but also the Tororo Cement Factory, the

¹⁰⁴KDA 39, Uganda vs. Laurentso Takwamu and Olive Kabadeya, 17 May 1978.

¹⁰⁵KDA 39, Uganda vs. Sesiria Mbambu, 13 July 1978.

¹⁰⁶KDA 39, Uganda vs. James Batekateka, 15 Aug. 1978.

¹⁰⁷KDA 39, Memo by Julious J. Ajudriga, 31 Dec. 1977.

State Trading Corporation, and others. The provincial veterinarian trusted him so much that he would give Mukasa money to go buy goods on his behalf.

Mukasa's petition is filled with details that speak to his good character, from the invoices and signatures he collected to the years of unblemished service. Never in these years had he lost even a single tin of cooking oil — and certainly no untoward behavior was occurring the night of 14 September. Instead, he clarified, the hour was late and moving the tins into his shop — a mere six meters from where the truck broke down — was protecting the goods from thieves while the repairs were done. If anyone jeopardized the essential commodities, it was the arresting officer who refused to listen to him and tried to drive the lorry with the reloaded tins, losing control of the vehicle as it “roared backwards through the streets [as] men jumped off the lorry for their lives.” What more evidence could be needed that he was not hoarding, but protecting, these goods? Closing his case, he reasserted his patriotism — “The basis for our Government is God and God is just. So I hope that justice in this matter will prevail” — but linked it to a clientelistic dependency on the good will of his superiors, clarifying that he was not blaming them “for this harsh action” since they were likely not receiving accurate information.¹⁰⁸

As this case suggests, what exactly constituted a hoard was not a settled matter.¹⁰⁹ In Bugembe District, administrators thought the chances of women “indulging in hoarding were very slim,” and therefore preferred to license them for trade.¹¹⁰ In Mukasa's view, it was also an issue of good character and intention: since his truck was being repaired, there was no intention to criminally contain the cooking oil. For police unwilling or able to ascertain intentionality, the mere act of removing goods from circulation was taken as a sign of hoarding. Immobilizing goods *and* hiding the immobility was even more heinous. Bar owners were condemned for the “dirty practice” of only exposing a couple cases of beer to customers. While they would blame suppliers for not bringing sufficient supplies, the reality was that they “keep the rest for MAGENDO business.”¹¹¹ Some goods were more amenable to hoarding than others. Cooking oil had a sizable profit margin and would last, if suitably hidden from view. Coffee beans needed to be carefully dried to endure past normal marketing season. Maize, a director of a produce marketing board noted in contrast, “is terribly perishable in that it can easily go to waste and get spoilt by weevil, etc. unless fumigated, an exercise which, with due respect, may be beyond the competence of reach of most farmers.”¹¹²

An elaborate micropolitics of display developed in the 1970s, as many Ugandans tried to hide their actions from prying eyes and the police tried to require visibility. The Trade Development Officer toured Busoga reminding traders that “Price tags must be clearly shown on goods for customers to see.”¹¹³ Price tags served to discipline the shopkeepers, objectively announcing the value of goods to impede discriminatory pricing.¹¹⁴ Receipts, also, were a technology for enforcing government price controls, required to be issued for all sales.¹¹⁵ In Uganda, this was a particularly salient concern, given a history of racialized resentment toward Asian vendors who, it was felt, offered unfair and fluctuating prices.¹¹⁶ In contrast, the independent state demanded commercial uniformity in which price tags, receipts, and official valuation removed the scope for improper discretion. Here, economic

¹⁰⁸JDA Trade and Industry 23/3, Jonathan Mukasa to Minister of Commerce and Industry, 30 Sep. 1973.

¹⁰⁹Gustav Peebles, “Rehabilitating the Hoard: The Social Dynamics of Unbanking in Africa and Beyond,” *Africa* 84, no. 4 (2014): 595–613.

¹¹⁰JDA Trade and Industry 23/3, Minutes of a Meeting in Bugembe District, [n.d. but 1975].

¹¹¹KDA 744, Meeting of Distributors and Bar Owners, 24 Nov. 1975.

¹¹²JDA Trade and Industry 23/3, Managing Director of Produce Marketing Board to all Governors, 7 May 1976.

¹¹³JDA Trade and Industry 14/25, Office of the District TTDO to all Traders in Busoga District, 2 Feb. 1973.

¹¹⁴On the “discursive authority” of price tags, see Ato Quayson, *Oxford Street: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹¹⁵On the regulatory powers of receipts, see Gustav Peebles, *The Euro and Its Rivals: Currency and the Construction of a Transnational City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), ch. 3.

¹¹⁶Vali Jamal, “Asians in Uganda, 1880–1972: Inequality and Expulsion,” *The Economic History Review* 29, no. 4 (1976): 609

citizenship was animated by the indignity of relative scarcity and the anxiety that others could transact while oneself was deprived. It demanded standardization and equality in the price of commodities.

Conclusion

A few months after Harriet Biryeri sold expensive bread to the undercover police, Mrs. Batambuze was back in her shop at No.47/49 Main Street, Jinja. Unsatisfied with the decision of Major Erifazi to suddenly close the doors and revoke her license, Batambuze petitioned His Excellency the President. It was not her fault, she told Idi Amin, that the young girl she employed contravened the pricing rules. Batambuze had given her instructions to charge proper prices, but Biryeri acted contrary to her boss' desires. For this, the employee was appropriately cautioned by the tribunal. Yet, it seemed unjust that Section 19(4) of the Economic Crimes Tribunal Decree — which permitted allocated businesses to be repossessed from guilty persons — would apply to the shopkeeper who was neither guilty nor accused. And it seems Idi Amin agreed with Batambuze casting blame on her employee, warning against economic criminality but reissuing the right to the shop. While Amin often ruled through arbitrary command and violence, he also relished the opportunity to engage citizens as a charismatic and beneficent patron.¹¹⁷

Some critics like the exiled Wanume Kibedi, a former Foreign Minister, were vocal in castigating the Economic War as a ruse, with Amin's "ethnic kith and kin" benefiting as "the booty" was used to buy support from a small portion of the population. The newly enriched had "interests... diametrically opposed to those of the workers and peasants," he declared in a warning to those seduced by Amin's charisma, rhetoric, and episodic responsiveness.¹¹⁸ Yet, many others were unable or unwilling to issue such condemnations, and they navigated the era with a combination of estrangement and enjoinment. While the Asian expulsion catalyzed existing economic troubles, it was quickly compounded by international oil crises, the collapse of Bretton Woods, and the misrule of Amin's government. The result was routinized hardship, yet experiences like Batambuze's encouraged Ugandans to keep writing petitions and making pleas. In doing so, many adopted bureaucratic protocols to hail the state as a fatherly patron or arbiter of distribution. Some positioned themselves as the proper national subjects — racially African and native to the land. Others defined themselves as taxpayers or adopted the status of "Common Man." The ability to contribute to the nation, its development and progress, allowed Ugandans to claim standing in the eyes of the state.¹¹⁹

In contrast to arguments about the hollowness of African citizenship and statecraft, this article shows the enduring strategies of claiming value through the distribution of goods and the allocation of opportunity — even in situations of widespread illegality. But the preponderance of male petitioners suggests a clear limit to such models of public authority and distribution. Such efforts were not the only way of provisioning: Uganda's Economic War hardly enjoyed uniform support, with evasion and noncompliance frequent. But at the same time as many Ugandans turned to smuggling, overcharging, and hoarding, their peers and compatriots worried about the effects of such behavior. From their perspective, disciplining the market was a necessary means to achieving respectable consumption and sociality, and it was from the state that such intervention must arise. As Derek Peterson writes of the era, "The remarkable thing is that — even in the face of state-authorized violence, even at a time when civil institutions were decrepit and poorly resources — so many people sought to make the legal bureaucracy work."¹²⁰

These were of limited efficacy, though, and impediments to ethical life — and its commercial firmament — were commonplace. As a result, many Ugandans blamed their fellow citizens for

¹¹⁷Richard Vokes, Derek Peterson, and Edgar Taylor, "Photography, Evidence and Concealed Histories from Idi Amin's Uganda, 1971–79," *History of Photography* 44, no. 2–3 (2020): 151–71.

¹¹⁸Wanume Kibedi, "Open Letter" in ICJ, *Violations of Human Rights*, 21 June 1974.

¹¹⁹See more generally, Donovan, *Money, Value, and the State*.

¹²⁰Peterson, "Government work," 632.

such a state of affairs and demanded the state redouble its efforts to discipline commercial activity. In this way, popular ethics were at odds with the neoliberal interpretation that came to dominate by the 1980s, which saw state involvement as an impediment to “getting prices right.” They also departed from more leftist interpretations that emphasized Uganda’s perverse incorporation into a world capitalist system. Instead, Ugandans in the 1970s looked at a world of uncontrolled commodities and saw insufficiently mutualist behavior by their compatriots and ineffective governance by their state.

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