Social Speech and Governance in Uganda

To Speak and Be Heard: Seeking Good Government in Uganda, ca. 1500–2015

By Holly Elisabeth Hanson. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2022. Pp. 268. $80.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9780821424438); $34.95, paperback (ISBN: 9780821424919); ebook (ISBN: 9780821447352).

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When I was an undergraduate student at Makerere University in Uganda in the early 2000s, strikes were a common feature of the institution. Sometime in 2002, I joined a peaceful demonstration over our unpaid allowances. After we had assembled in front of the faculty of arts and begun marching to the vice chancellor's office to speak to him, we encountered a vicious police unit, and our demonstration turned violent. However, one place, Freedom Square, which lies between the university library, the university's administration block, and the school of social sciences, saved our lives. As soon as we entered Freedom Square, the commanding officer instructed his force to leave students alone because we had entered a historically designated space where we were allowed to assemble and speak with no interference. The police no longer had the authority to pursue students.

In *To Speak and Be Heard*, Holly Hanson offers a provocative history of these ideas, paying keen attention to 'how spaces worked in the past' and demonstrating other strategies ordinary people have used to keep authority in check in Uganda (2). Hanson argues that Ugandans have for centuries sought consultative and accountable governance. She pushes back against the histories written in the colonial era by both Europeans and Ugandans, portraying the precolonial era as 'dominated by despotic indigenous rulers' (2). Hanson notes that there were mechanisms put in place to keep leaders in check that earlier writers have not paid attention to.

According to Hanson, rulers were obligated to care for their subjects, and the subjects reciprocated by assenting and giving leaders gifts. However, when leaders failed to take care of their subjects or became autocratic, their subjects could deny them gifts and could gather in specific spaces to express their dissatisfaction. Among these spaces were courtyards of kings and chiefs, family compounds, and markets, where the people could withdraw their allegiance from that leader and give it to another (188). These strategies, Hanson argues, can be traced to the beginning of the sixteenth century, before the emergence of kingship in East Africa, and they survived the most tumultuous periods, such as the slave trade and the 'perverse social engineering of foreign rule' (3). Hanson contends that these were the ways subjects pushed back against 'despotic intentions'; participated in governance; made their voices heard; and, together with their rulers, solved problems (184). 'People with authority', Hanson explains, 'had to respond to the considered observation of those below them if they were to keep their power' (3).

Drawing on an array of sources, including historical linguistics, dynastic traditions, clan histories, interviews, and archival documents, Hanson offers five tightly argued chapters that present a far more complex picture of power, authority, and governance in Uganda than had been previously presented. Specifically, Chapter One, which begins in 1500, provides a useful background,

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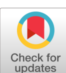

documenting the origins of the spaces for 'seeking harmony'. She argues that strategies of participation preceded the rise of kingdoms and were not destroyed by the expansion of kingdoms nor social challenges and disorder, such as those prompted by the Indian Ocean slave trade (44). Chapter Two documents people's engagement with British colonial officials, noting that Ugandans 'never stopped trying to educate the British on how rulers and ruled ought to behave to each other' (49). More specifically, she noted that colonial subjects continued explaining 'the proper rules of good governance to European colonizers' (3). Hanson rejects the notion that the British took over Uganda immediately upon their arrival. Colonial rule, she argues, 'developed slowly' and 'relied on the symbolic participation of Ganda chiefs' (14).

Chapter Three explores the impact of colonial rule on the practice of speaking and being heard, showing that these political strategies of accountability continued in the colonial era but were undermined by growing inequality and intervention of the state in criminalizing public speech. Specifically, Hanson argues that the wave of strikes and mass protests of the 1940s, which involved thousands of people, were not 'entirely new' nor simply a result of 'an anti-colonial impulse or from emerging class consciousness', as some scholars have suggested. Rather, 'they were old strategies that had worked for East Africans in the past, and they had effect in the 1940s' (82).

In Chapter Four, Hanson argues that Ugandans had 'the capacity to launch a united, functional nation-state, and they could have done so if leaders in Buganda and Britain, and Uganda's politicians had made different choices' (15). She notes that, while both British and Ugandan leaders interfered with citizen participation, they did not kill the practice. 'The aspiration and the practice of speaking and expecting to be heard still existed, and people aspired to take it onto a national stage' (152). The last chapter dwells on Uganda in the 1970s and 1980s, showing that strategies of speaking and listening came back into public space (179). Hanson argues that if we pay attention to the 1970s in particular, we can see the 'enduring salience' of the old ideas of governance (15). Idi Amin, Hanson explains, used some of the old strategies in his early days as president to solve his 'crisis of legitimacy' through 'elaborate enactment of participation, speaking and listening'. But these ideas failed to work effectively because of 'profound inequality' (15).

To Speak and Be Heard is an outstanding contribution to Ugandan and African historiographies. It builds on the study of power and authority, highlighting the role of *ordinary* people in keeping leaders accountable.[1] Ugandans, as Hanson shows, were not passive and dependent subjects but, rather, active participants with powers to withhold gifts and other things the leaders depended on to ensure good governance (190). Moreover, this book pushes the chronology of the study of power and authority from the late precolonial era or early colonial era, where most studies have ended, to the present.[2] In so doing, it allows Hanson to make an important contribution to the growing literature on intellectual history in Africa, showing continuity and transformation of ideas in power and governance from the sixteenth century to the present.

One minor issue with the book is that the early chapters overly focus on Buganda. The author's arguments in the Introduction, and also in Chapter Two, when talking about Ugandans, led this reader to expect examples from other regions of the country integrated in the early chapters.

[1]For some of the important works on power and authority in precolonial Africa, especially on Uganda and Africa's Great Lakes region, see D. Schoenbrun, *The Names of the Python: Belonging in East Africa, 900 to 1930* (Madison, 2021); N. Kodesh, *Beyond the Royal Gaze*: *Clanship and Public Healing in Buganda* (Charlottesville, 2010); H. E. Hanson, *Landed Obligation: The Practice of Power in Buganda* (Portsmouth, NH, 2003); R. Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda: Economy, Society, and Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2002); D. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, a Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Portsmouth, NH, 1998); D. Newbury, *Kings and Clans: Ijwi Island and the Lake Kivu Rift, 1780–1840* (Madison, 1991); W. Arens and I. Karp, *Creativity of Power: Cosmology and Action in African Societies* (Washington, DC, 1989).

[2]For some of the important works on power and authority that have stopped in either the late precolonial era or early colonial era, see Schoenbrun, *The Names of the Python*; Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, a Good Place*; Kodesh, *Beyond the Royal Gaze;* Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda*; Hanson, *Landed Obligation*, and Newbury, *Kings and Clans*.

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However, this was not the case. Despite this concern, *To Speak and Be Heard* is a compelling study that makes important contributions to the various bodies of literature; I highly recommend it to anyone interested in understanding power, authority, and governance in Africa. My wish is that this book gets to Ugandan politicians, particularly some of today's parliamentarians who participated in bringing down Amin's regime in the late 1970s, so that they can better understand their actions back then and their current electorates — who continue to assemble in public spaces and make demands of their leaders — from a historian's perspective.

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Confinement and Politics in Uganda

Carceral Afterlives: Prisons, Detention, and Punishment in Postcolonial Uganda

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To write of prisons is to write of politics. This is a point made abundantly clear in the opening lines of Katherine Bruce-Lockhart's compelling new monograph, *Carceral Afterlives*, which considers the complicated history of imprisonment in postcolonial Uganda. She begins the book with an epigraph from Rajat Neogy, a famous Ugandan political prisoner who described his experiences of detention in an essay for *The New York Times* in October 1969. 'Imprisonment politicizes everyone', he wrote shortly after his release. 'Arbitrary arrests and imprisonment without trial provide a new pattern and insight for him [the detainee] into the true nature and the insecurities of the governments that use it'.[1] Bruce-Lockhart uses insights gleaned from former detainees such as Neogy, as well as a host of other written and oral sources, to analyze the 'true nature' and 'insecurities' of the Ugandan postcolonial state. She argues that confinement — both as a form of punishment and as a 'vehicle' for other types of punishment (corporal or capital punishment, deportation, forced labor, and so on) — was central to state power and an important locus of dissent among those who opposed the government's frequent use of incarceration and detention (4). She demonstrates that imprisonment is deeply rooted in Uganda. It functioned as an important 'technology of empire' throughout colonial rule and has remained a central part of colonialism's afterlife (6).

This book is the product of meticulous research and careful analysis. Bruce-Lockhart uses annual reports, personnel files, photographs, rule books, and other 'archival remnants' from the Uganda Prisons Service (UPS) to provide the empirical scaffolding (18). These materials signaled the institution's professionalism to both internal and external audiences, serving bureaucratic and

[1] R. Neogy, 'Topics: how it feels to be a political prisoner', *New York Times*, 25 Oct. 1969, 32.

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