

BOOK REVIEW

Holly Elisabeth Hanson. *To Speak and Be Heard: Seeking Good Government in Uganda, ca. 1500–2015*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2022. xiv + 253 pp. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$34.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780821424919.

How do Ugandans understand what constitutes good governance today and how have they understood it in previous generations? Given the political turbulence of its first two decades as an independent nation and the lack of political transition since Yoweri Kaguta Museveni came to power in 1986, this is a question worth asking. In *To Speak and Be Heard: Seeking Good Government in Uganda, ca. 1500–2015*, historian Holly Hanson makes the case that the Ugandan ideal of good government entails listening to multiple voices and opinions and a recognition that many people had to affirm authority for it to be legitimate and upheld. She argues that this notion of how government should work is a long-standing one and, whether during colonial rule or before, people “spoke to the powerful, and expected to be heard” (3).

This is an ambitious book. It seeks to offer a new vision of political action in Uganda and undermine assumptions that there is anything inevitable about the country’s political history over the past sixty years. It is also a book written from a deeply humanistic perspective, one that foregrounds the actions and ideas of Baganda and (later) Ugandans who did not “win” at various points in the past. In order to make this case, Hanson argues in Chapter One that the notion of a politics of assent and assembly can be traced back to “Ancient East Africa.” This chapter draws primarily on evidence from Buganda after 1500, which is where Hanson’s argument is most convincing. The inclusion of a somewhat erratic array of examples from across the continent and across time to make a broader and deeper argument about African political traditions is less effective, as is the attempt to claim that the political model presented can be generalized to all of what became Uganda. The diversity of political forms is missing in the effort to apply her model to other regions, undermining the argument.

Having set out this politics of assent and assembly, Hanson explores how we might rethink the early interactions between Europeans and Baganda in the second half of the nineteenth century and the ultimate imposition of British colonial rule. She argues, in Chapter Two, that Baganda “engaged with foreigners face to face in spaces where the visitors (perhaps unknowingly) enacted assent and approval of the power of kings” and that they “compelled even their most arrogant foreign visitors to engage with them in spaces of consultation premised on the expectations that selfishness undermined good governance” (46). Hanson offers a compelling rereading of the evidence of these interactions, although

again this is a story about Buganda, rather than Uganda as a whole. And, we are forced to grapple with the reality that those “visitors” ultimately imposed their vision of governance. Where the argument is strongest is in showing how the British and other Europeans failed to understand the meaning behind various actions by Baganda and others.

The book then jumps to the mid twentieth century and two moments of political action: the general strike of 1945 and the attempt to redirect the *lukiiko* (the government of Buganda) through assembly and dissent in 1949 in Chapter Three and the exile and return of Muteesa II, king of Buganda, in the 1950s in Chapter Four. Drawing on a range of sources, but importantly including newly available material from the British archives, Hanson argues that the strike and various protests were not violent riots but generally calm gatherings of thousands of people seeking to withdraw labor and insist that their voices be heard. She argues that a key factor was what she describes as a growing economic inequality in a colonial society, although absent reliable economic data it is hard to quantify any such change. More importantly, Hanson notes that after these events, the governor of Uganda “criminalized public speech” and so “interrupted a dynamic process of learning” about how to belong to Uganda rather than Buganda (119). That interruption was compounded, for Hanson, in the 1950s by the political crisis caused by the exile of the Muteesa II and the exploitation of that crisis by a small, wealthy, and powerful group of chiefs. She argues that there was a possibility that a different, “Ugandan” form of self-governance and modernity could have emerged, grounded in assent and assembly, but which was forestalled. The last chapter takes us into the period of Idi Amin’s rule and moments when Ugandans asserted a politics of assembly and the refusal of assent, such as when Makerere University students held protests and dissolved their Student Guild rather than allow Amin to install a member of the military as its president.

To Speak and Be Heard is strongest in its depiction of the many ways that Baganda and, in the late twentieth century, Ugandans have insisted on their right to be heard and seen by their rulers. That they have done so in the face of profound violence is all the more striking. Resisting the impulse to seek to generalize this political model to all of Uganda, East Africa and beyond, would have strengthened the early chapters and laid a stronger foundation for the later ones.

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