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IMAGINING DEMOCRACY: POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRATISATION IN BUGANDA

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Despite the recent resurgence of interest in democratisation in Africa, the systematic study of local understandings of democracy on the continent has barely begun. An earlier academic and African nationalist consensus held that Western-style liberal democracy was ill suited to African societies and cultures, which contained alternative forms of democratic practice rooted in traditional communalism, and that economic development was a higher post-independence priority than the maintenance of democratic institutions.[1] By the 1980s, however, Africa's 'one-party democracies' had proven both politically and developmentally disastrous, and the earlier consensus which seemed to justify them was abandoned. But the rush to renounce the older perspective has obscured the element of truth contained within it. For if Africans have shown themselves by no means uninterested in democracy, the democracy which they envision often does differ significantly from Western liberal conceptions.

While the earlier orthodoxy produced surprisingly little detailed research into local understandings of democracy and its assimilation to existing political cosmologies and practices, the new departures have provided an even weaker impetus toward such enquiry.[2] In this article I hope to contribute to a nascent literature which does take seriously the implications of local conceptions and practices for the prospects of democracy in Africa.[3] I examine the way democracy is understood and enacted by Baganda, the one-time subjects of the king of Buganda, which was the largest of Uganda's old kingdoms. My emphasis is on the complexity and dynamism of the process of articulation whereby elements of Western and global democratic discourse and practice have been selectively assimilated to an existing political cosmology, while also transforming that cosmology in important respects.

'DEMOCRACY' IN LUGANDA

Although the concept of democracy has played some role in Ugandan political discourse since at least the 1940s, its popularisation has largely been due to the political rhetoric of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government which came to power in 1986. By 1992, when I began my fieldwork, the English word 'democracy' was familiar to most rural Baganda, even those who spoke little or no English.[4] Their comprehension of the word, however, was organised around its standard translation into the Luganda language. This translation deserves careful analysis, since it effects a significant semantic shift in relation to the Western conception of democracy as 'rule of the people'.[5]

Like 'democracy' (from the Greek *demos* and *kratia*), the Luganda translation, *eddembe ery'obuntu*, is a composite term. The meaning of *eddembe*, however, is much closer to 'liberty' than to 'rule' or 'power'

(*kratia*). It is generally used in the sense of having the freedom or liberty to carry out some particular activity without constraints imposed from above, for instance in the phrases *eddembe ery'okwogera* (freedom of speech) and *ebiseera eby'eddembe* (free/leisure time). It also carries the connotation of 'peace', and is cognate with the noun *emirembe*, meaning 'peace' and also 'royal reign', with which it is sometimes used interchangeably.

Obuntu, which is the abstract noun form of *muntu/bantu*, (person/people), may seem to correspond relatively well with the notion of 'the people' (*demos*). Its emphasis, however, differs from that of the contemporary Western inclusive and quantitative notion of 'the people' as comprising an entire citizenry on the principle of the political equality of individuals. This is evident from the most important idiomatic usage of the word, in the expression *obuntubulamu*. *Obuntubulamu* (healthy humanness) is a crucial term of public morality, connoting 'the possession of courtesy, compassion, good breeding, culture' (Murphy, 1972). *Obuntu* is thus less a politico-demographic category than an ethical and civic ideal. It reflects a notion of humanity which is differentially rather than uniformly conceived; a pan-human aim, perhaps, but by no means a pan-human achievement. As such, it is perhaps best translated as 'civility' in the somewhat archaic sense of the word which combines the senses of good governance and collective advancement on the level of polity with an emphasis on morality and 'good manners' at the level of individual conduct.[6]

Eddembe ery'obuntu can thus be taken to mean something like 'civil liberty', but in a sense which inherently establishes 'civil' limits not only on the exercise of authority but also on the exercise of the liberties themselves. In addition to its usage to translate 'democracy' it is also, and more accurately, used to translate 'human rights'. What interests me here, however, is precisely the semantic shift involved in its use as the standard translation of 'democracy'. This translation both effects and reflects the assimilation of the imported notion of 'democracy' to an historically anchored local constellation of conceptions of authority and the proper relationship between rulers and subjects.

FREEDOM FROM OPPRESSION

The first impulse among my informants was often to specify the meaning of democracy and *eddembe ery'obuntu* in terms of freedom from oppression. At one level, this focus was undoubtedly an outcome of Buganda's long-standing and disastrous conflict with the Ugandan state. Accustomed to favouritism under colonial rule, the Buganda kingdom, situated in southern Uganda, was politically outmanoeuvred after independence and unilaterally abolished in 1967 by Uganda's first President, Milton Obote. Idi Amin's 1971 *coup* was greeted with jubilation in Buganda, but his regime quickly deteriorated into a brutal military dictatorship. The 1979 liberation from Amin brought Obote back to power and set the stage for a protracted and murderous civil war fought largely on Buganda soil, which resulted in the eventual victory of the NRM under the leadership of Yoweri Museveni in 1986. Acceding, albeit reluctantly, to popular royalist sentiment in Buganda, the new government sanctioned the restoration of the Buganda monarchy in

1993. Although it is led primarily by western Ugandans, the NRM is thus the only Ugandan government since independence which has not taken on the aspect for Baganda of a foreign occupation.

While the oppression endured by Ugandans since independence is thus a brute enough fact, its local interpretation is less self-evident. My informants did not conceive of oppression as a consequence of unregulated or excessive state power. Rather, they conceived of it as the consequence of a disordered state, of authority which has lost its anchor. In this context, it is worth emphasising the close link between *eddembe* and *emirembe*, meaning 'peace' but also, inextricably, 'epoch' or 'royal reign'. In the pre-colonial kingdom the death of a king was followed by a period of both symbolic and material violence and disorder, which came to an end with the ritual installation of a successor to the throne (Roscoe, 1911: 103; Ray, 1991: 109). With the new reign came the return of order and freedom from arbitrary violence and oppression. In 1993 the coronation of Ronald Mutebi, ending an interregnum of nearly a quarter-century, was discussed in similar terms by royalist Baganda. Liberty in its most basic sense is thus a concomitant of a rightly ordered polity oriented around a properly and firmly installed ruler.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

When I asked them to specify the positive liberties which they counted as central to *eddembe ery'obuntu*, most of my informants focused on the freedom of speech.

'Democracy'[7] is granted when a person has his/her freedom [*eddembe*] and can be heard if s/he has something to say regarding his/her affairs. [Young Muslim man, petty trader]

From what I understand, [democracy] means that under that form of rule I can have my ideas and they are taken into consideration. That's the main thing. I can get what I need provided that I ask for it. [Middle-aged Protestant woman, schoolteacher]

'Democracy' is *eddembe ery'obuntu*, each person speaking for himself, without reprisals, saying what you care about the most and saying it openly, and having it answered properly. [Middle-aged Protestant man, well educated]

Presently we can say there is democracy, because we can stand up and say something and the authority listens to it. [Young Catholic man, teacher, interviewed in English]

One of the most consistent characteristics of these equations of democracy with the freedom of speech is the implied orientation of that speech. It is not speech directed toward a general audience of equals, but rather the speech of subjects directed toward their ruler. In an interview recorded by Tidemand

(1995: 125) this framework is used to contrast Uganda's two longest-serving Presidents:

> Obote's government did not allow any speaking. . . . If Obote wanted to remove someone from parliament, it was simply done. But it isn't like that now. If Museveni wants to reshuffle the Cabinet he consults the people. . . . For example, Museveni passed an order to stop charcoal burners from cutting down trees. The ordinary people raised the alarm and when Museveni was on his way back from a visit to Luwero they stopped him [near Kampala] and raised their complaint. They asked him: Do you want the townspeople in Buganda to die? Ever since we were young we have relied on charcoal. He later agreed with them and issued a statement allowing charcoal burners to continue their work, but selling charcoal at a reasonable price. Today a common man can speak, but during the Amin and Obote regimes you could simply be killed by the soldiers of the special forces.
>
> [Informant No. 20: translation altered[8]]

The image evoked here, of Museveni as a ruler who consults the people he rules, does not in any way qualify his power or authority. There is no conception of a reversal or equalisation of authority relations between subjects and rulers. Museveni does not obey his subjects' wishes as their representative; he listens to their complaints and judges the case by virtue of his position as a ruler. He also does not merely withdraw his moratorium on charcoal burning, leaving the people free to do as they like; instead, he replaces it with another command, purportedly regulating the price of charcoal—a command which is all the more revealing in that it was never actually issued.

The conception of legitimate authority as hinging on open lines of communication between a ruler and his subjects is codified in the most widely told story about the pre-colonial kingship. The story tells of Muteesa I (1856–84), who succeeded to the throne under the name Mukaabya, meaning 'He who makes people cry/scream'.

> Mukaabya made people cry/scream [okukaaba] for his own amusement and that of his fellow royals. He forced them to carry bundles of reeds so that the sharp ends cut into their heads. He planted sharp needles in the ground so that when people prostrated before him their hands would be punctured. Soon his people began to flee. When he realised that they were abandoning him, he was persuaded to change his manner and he began to discuss [okuteesa] matters with them. To show his change of heart, he took the new name Muteesa—'He who discusses'.[9]

Despite the fact that a number of pre-colonial Ganda kings actually were deposed or overthrown, the possibility of rebelling against the king was not raised in any of the versions of this story told to me. The implicit model here is of the king as the immobile centre of the political order; it is the people who come and go, and who use their mobility to sway their rulers to better conduct and freer communication.

The Ganda concern with freedom of speech thus differs from a general Western liberal conception in that it is rooted, not in a model of politics as competition for power among the plural representatives of various political views, but rather in a model of legitimate *unitary* authority as founded on the willingness of power-holders to hear the voices of their subjects. Freedom of

speech is a principle which does not stand in conceptual opposition to the singularity and transcendence of power, but rather presupposes it. The specification of 'democracy' as 'freedom of speech' thus further assimilates the concept to a local ideology of political order.

JUSTICE AND EQUITY

Another central element in the Ganda conception of legitimate authority and, by extension, of democracy, is the fair and impartial judgement of disputes and court cases.

> The way I understand 'democracy' is that it contains truth and justice/fairness [*obwenkanya*]; if you are a leader you have to be honest and you have to be fair-minded [*onwenkanya*]. [Middle-aged Catholic man]

> 'Democracy', I would say, is like *eddembe*, and from what I can tell you, *eddembe ery'obuntu* is to judge fairly when something is not as it should be. [Cited by Tidemand, 1995: 125]

This conception of fair judgement frequently came up in discussions of the monarchy:

> What made us love the king in this way is that he was a good man who really loved the ordinary people down below without discriminating [*tasosola*] against anyone, and when there was a conflict he would judge by taking a middle position and deciding correctly. [Middle-aged Muslim man, RC3 chairman]

The concepts of justice (*obwenkanya*) and impartiality (*obutasosola*) were used by informants in explaining both the importance of free speech and their sense of justice. *Obwenkanya* is an abstract noun derived from the verb *kwenkana*, 'to be equal/similar', and can be loosely translated as 'fairness' or 'equality.' The equation of democracy with *obwenkanya* may seem to indicate something akin to Western egalitarianism. What is implied here, however, is narrower: a situational equality of subjects before a power-holder and decision-maker rather than an ontological equality of persons. Hence the centrality of the implied audience of decision-makers in statements like the following:

> I understand 'democracy' to mean *obwenkanya*, like when you give an opinion and it is not ignored but *is also considered and a decision is made taking it into account*. [Cited by Tidemand, 1995: 127; emphasis added]

Such situational equality is an important element in contemporary royalist political consciousness. If power equalises, then the king himself is the greatest of equalisers. He does not acknowledge, but rather *creates*, equality by '[loving] the ordinary people down below without discriminating against anyone'. The principle is most dramatically demonstrated in the prostration before the king which is a virtual requirement of all his male subjects on public occasions, and which one young man at a post-coronation ceremony

in 1993 enthusiastically explained to me as showing that 'before the *kabaka*
there is no rank'.

Democracy as *eddembe ery'obuntu*, while predicated on the absence of
oppressive constraints upon people's behaviour, thus presupposes the
existence of a legitimate authority capable of dealing judicially with
violations of certain basic norms and rights.

CIVILITY AND HIERARCHY

I have suggested that the phrase *eddembe ery'obuntu* may be most accurately
rendered into English as 'civil liberty'. This is because the qualification of
eddembe by *obuntu* points away from a sense of intrinsic individual
freedoms or rights and toward an understanding of freedom as guaranteed by
a rightly ordered polity, a society where both rulers and subjects conform to
standards of civility which are inseparably ethical and political.[10] Indeed,
several of my informants were quick to warn against the dangers of an
individualistic interpretation of *eddembe*:

> When *eddembe* is taken too far it is a bad thing. . . . Someone might refuse to
> work, to pay taxes, to dig wells, saying: I have my freedom. [Young Protestant
> man, sub-county chief, well educated]

Others insisted on a communal conception of liberty itself:

> *Q.* What do you understand the word 'democracy' to mean?
>   *A.* I think it is the freedom [*eddembe*] which a person should have.
>   *Q.* Freedom to do what?
>   *A.* The freedom to work with your friends as you like and as they like,
>   not just to get yours and keep it for yourself. We are all equal
>   [*twenkanankana*] in our freedom, and we should share it together.
>   [Young Protestant woman, secondary-school leaver]

A few even linked democracy directly to standards of conduct:

> I understand 'democracy' as self-governance [*okwefuga*]. That is, you have to
> have good manners/habits [*empisa*] in order to govern yourself. You have to
> change your manners/habits so you are doing good things, and then you can call
> yourself 'democratic'. [Young Protestant woman, primary-school teacher]

Ganda standards of civility, manners and proper conduct are deeply imbued
with hierarchical elements. One of the main reasons given by my informants
for their enthusiasm for the restoration of the monarchy was that it would
revive such 'customs' or 'manners' (*empisa*) as obedience and respect for
parents and elders, proper (i.e. deferential) greetings on the part of children
and women, and unquestioning fealty to the king. The transmission and
maintenance of such norms are felt to be the responsibility of the clans, and
the abolition of the kingship is considered to have deprived the clan system
of its coherence and moral authority. Indeed, the system of clans and king
serves as a kind of hierarchical template for Baganda. Many attribute

Uganda's descent into political turmoil in large part to the moral decay attendant upon the weakening of this system and the absence of a king.

There are several features of Ganda hierarchism which are central to understanding how the concept of 'democracy' has been assimilated to local conceptions of civility: the view of hierarchy as constructed from the bottom up; the singularity of power; regulated competition; and the unifying force of nested solidarities. Each feature can be viewed as based upon, or at least exemplified by, the system of clans and king.

When asked to describe the clan system, Baganda invariably begin with the household and recite the ascending levels of lineage, sub-branch, branch and clan. Each level has its head (*omutaka*), culminating in the 'roof' head (*omutaka ow'akasolya*), who is the linear descendant and living incarnation of the founding ancestor of the clan. This recitation is thus simultaneously a recitation of descent, and echoes the standard form of lineage recitation which is required of participants in clan gatherings. At the summit of all these hierarchies of *bataka* stands the king as *Ssaabataka*, or Super-clan-head, who is conceived, in this context, as the leader (*omukulembeze*) rather than the ruler (*omufuzi*) of the fifty-two 'roof' clan heads. This conception of the hierarchical structure thus emphasises the allegiance of subordinates to superiors rather than the power of superiors over subordinates, and highlights the nested structure of hierarchically arranged solidarities.

Alongside the bottom-up conception of this system, there is a seemingly contrary sense that the system hinges upon the singularity and transcendence of its head. Ganda kingship is *mon*archical in the strongest sense. The king is the *Nnamunswa* (Queen Termite) around whom the termite mound revolves. He is also the pinnacle (*entikko*) of his realm, and his installation is really an 'empinnaclement' (*amatikkira*).[11] Hence the impulse to assert that *kabaka yekka* (the king stands alone) in 1961 in response to the post-independence prospect of an elected party leader assuming powers comparable to those of the king (Hancock, 1970). This insistence on singularity is echoed at other levels of social organisation as well: every household has a single (prescriptively male) head; every public ceremony must be graced by a single guest of honour (*omugenyi omukulu*); and, most important, every Muganda is 'replaced' upon his or her death by a single successor (*omusika*) who takes over his or her structural role, regardless of any division of the material inheritance, and is installed in a ceremony which closely parallels the royal installation (Ray, 1991).

While the singularity of power is central to Ganda hierarchism, there is a relatively weak emphasis on the fixed ranking of groups or individuals within the hierarchy. The clans are not formally ranked in prestige or precedence, even though some are considerably older and larger than others. There is no particular preference for the firstborn in either royal or commoner succession, so that the sons of a living father stand in constant structural competition with one other. Where established ranking does figure prominently, the assignment of individuals to ranks is generally done by the single power-holder, whose prerogative it is to rearrange the hierarchy at will. In the pre-colonial kingdom, chiefships were held by royal appoint-ment, and even hereditary ritual functions were often reassigned by the king based on the exploits or loyalty of particular clan members. Competition and

competitiveness were thus fundamental to the pre-colonial Ganda political order (Fallers, 1959; Richards, 1964).

A similar, if somewhat depoliticised, competitive ethic is evident in the contemporary centrality of sporting competitions and competitive gift-giving to public occasions of all sorts. No local festivity is complete without a bicycle race, a plantain-peeling contest, a football match, or the like, all presided over by the guest of honour. Indeed, much of the recent royalist revival has been oriented around various clan-based competitions, such as the annual clan football tournament, which was revived in 1987. While these activities demonstrate the valorisation of competitiveness, it is equally significant that they constitute distinctly regulated forms of competition. They are invariably presided over by the king or a visiting dignitary, the single 'guest of honour', who serves as the situational 'pinnacle' of power toward whom the competition is oriented as its audience and who distributes the prizes. They cannot in principle involve competition *for* that pinnacle itself. In fact the pinnacle is the immovable condition of the possibility of the competition, the creator of a level playing field: 'before the *kabaka* there is no rank'. The singularity of power and the value of competition are thus interdependent rather than contradictory principles.

This compatibility of competition and hierarchy, and the internal dynamic that arises from it, is illustrated particularly well by popular attitudes towards the political advancement of women during the last ten years under an explicitly 'pro-women' NRM policy (Boyd, 1989). The majority of my informants, regardless of gender, were enthusiastic about this development, citing the achievements and competence of those women who had risen to prominent positions, and often noting their superiority to the general run of male politicians. But most of them, again regardless of gender, also insisted that the political advancement of women should not and would not change the established relations of domestic hierarchy between husbands and wives.

Taken together, these features—a bottom-up structure of nested allegiances, the singularity of power, and regulated competition—constitute a local model of social solidarity and unity in diversity. More concretely, the embodiment of these features in the system of clans and king is viewed as the foundation of a 'civil' and unified socio-political order. Such unity (*okwegatta*) is regularly advanced as a prime political value and as the underlying reason for clan activities and even the existence of clans. Less well educated Baganda were often surprised to discover that in my homeland there are no clans and would ask me, 'How can you be united without them?'[12]

As in any hegemonic socio-political cosmology, Ganda hierarchism is differentially interpreted and enacted by social agents based upon the position they occupy in the social order to which the cosmology pertains. Elite Baganda and senior men, for instance, tend to emphasise the primacy of obedience or discipline (*obuwulize*), while women, younger men and non-elites stress the values of communication, justice and accountability. Yet there is little if any systematic divergence of this sort with regard to understandings of democracy. While subordinate groups certainly infuse their understandings of democracy with a preferential emphasis on accountability over obedience, they do not seem to have embraced the

concept more enthusiastically than their social superiors, nor do they seem to give it a more egalitarian or anti-hierarchical interpretation. The potential counter-hegemonic leverage which the popularisation of the concept of democracy might be expected to afford these groups has thus by and large yet to be realised.

DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

So far, I have tried to show some of the ways in which the concept of democracy has been assimilated to local conceptions of civility, authority, legitimacy and the accountability of ruler to subjects. Democracy, however, consists not only in political conceptions but also in political institutions and practices. Baganda now have nearly a half-century of intermittent experience with the key institutions of Western representative democracy—elections, political parties and representative government. It is revealing that, when I asked my rural informants to tell me the meaning of democracy, these institutions virtually never figured in their answers. But if elections, parties and representation do not figure at the same level of priority as justice, communication and civility, this does not necessarily mean that Baganda are indifferent to these institutions.

PARTIES AND ELECTIONS: HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

By comparison with most other African colonial territories, no strong nationalist political movement or party emerged in Uganda during the late colonial period.[13] Uganda's first political parties were formed in Buganda in the wake of violent popular protests against commercial domination by Asian traders and the ensconced and unresponsive Ganda chiefly oligarchy in 1945 and 1949, but they were relatively unsuccessful at taking advantage of these dissatisfactions. When the British administration partially acceded to their demands for the introduction of elected representatives to local and regional councils, the ensuing elections were virtually ignored by the general population, with voter turn-out in the 1950s of only 5–10 per cent (Southwold, 1964: 239). Popular support for the parties did swell when they fought for the return of King Muteesa after the British had exiled him in a bungled attempt to force through a set of controversial reforms, but waned again following Muteesa's return.

One of the most important reasons for the relative weakness of Uganda's first political parties was that they were perceived from the start as a threat to the existing political structure in Buganda. In fact it was the refusal of the ruling chiefs in 1958 to allow direct elections and the institutionalisation of parties within the Buganda Council (Lukiiko) which undermined and eventually destroyed the Uganda National Congress (UNC), then the leading political party. But the chiefs were not alone in mistrusting political parties. Despite their continued dissatisfaction with the chiefs, the general population remained relatively reluctant to support the parties. This situation, where neither the chiefs nor the parties were able to depend upon popular backing, led to a political vacuum in Buganda in the late 1950s, just as the delicate issue of Buganda's status in relation to an independent Uganda was being

worked out. It was exacerbated by the formation of the Catholic-dominated Democratic Party in opposition to the Protestant-dominated UNC,[14] and by the disintegration of the UNC into pro- and anti-Buganda groups—the beginning of a tendency for parties to exploit religious and ethnic antagonisms which continued to plague Ugandan politics well into the post-colonial period.

In 1961 the political vacuum in Buganda was filled by a sudden rush of popular royalism and anti-party sentiment. Beginning as a popular move-ment independent of both the political establishment and the existing political parties, Kabaka Yekka (The King Alone; KY) was a sort of anti-party party emphasising undivided loyalty to the king and the threat posed by political parties (Hancock, 1970). They based their campaign on the image of the king as the *Nnamunswa* who kills the red ants (parties) which are trying to destroy her termite mound. KY won a huge majority of Buganda votes in the 1962 independence elections, but was soon taken over by organised political interests and outmanoeuvred by Milton Obote's Uganda People's Congress (UPC), with which it had entered into an opportunistic alliance. Nevertheless, it contributed during its brief existence to transform-ing an existing distrust of political parties among Baganda into a more pronounced hostility.

In the more than thirty years since independence Uganda has had only one subsequent multi-party national election. Its first elected government, under Obote's UPC, imposed a new custom-made constitution on parliament and moved toward one-party rule in the late 1960s. Amin did not allow parties to operate in the 1970s. The elections following Amin's removal, in 1980, were widely regarded as having been rigged in the UPC's favour, and Obote's second presidency was dominated by a brutal civil war. When the NRM came to power in 1986 they suspended party political activities, allowing party members to speak and publish freely and stand for political office as individuals, but not to hold party meetings or rallies, or to stand as party candidates. Their argument for this policy, that Uganda's political parties had proven divisive and destructive, struck a deep chord with Baganda, and the conduct of local and parliamentary elections on a non-party basis during the past decade has been widely popular among them.

THE PROBLEM WITH PARTIES

Political parties were profoundly unpopular among Baganda when I conducted my research. Virtually every informant who offered me an explanation of Uganda's troubles since independence blamed them primarily on political parties. A recurring charge against political parties was that they tend to disrupt even the most fundamental of solidarities, pitting father against child, brother against brother, and neighbour against neighbour:

> Political parties [*ebibiina eby'obufuzi*] brought divisions among us, so that children differed with their fathers, and relatives parted ways over parties. Because if I am KY, that one is UPC, and you are DP, we cannot sit down together and talk things over. [Older Protestant man, landowner]

> We don't see any use for these parties. Because there is only quarrelling in them. Someone can hate his neighbour just because he dresses differently. [Older Muslim man, land surveyor]

> Political parties make each man the enemy of his fellow man. They just kill each other. [Middle-aged Muslim man, bus driver]

The general condemnation of political parties extended to a pejorative conception of politics itself:

> Wherever there is politics [eby'obufuzi] things get spoiled. Because with politics, for instance if I am your father, and you are DP, another is UPC, and another one. . . . ., that is to say, we can all be mixed up together, and then this system comes in and [clap, clap] we all end up dead. Parents lose all their children. [Elderly Catholic man, carpenter, RC3 representative]

Parties were accused of promoting an ambition for power so excessive, so unregulated, as to render compromise and communication impossible:

> For my part I don't want them back because I've seen what they do. A party supporter can't allow anyone else to rule. Instead he fights for the seat of power [entebe], and if he doesn't get it there is trouble. They create divisions because you see DP or UPC sticking to themselves as if they were born divided. They don't want anyone to make even the smallest comment because of the power they have [olw'entebe gy'alimu]. [Middle-aged Protestant man, primary-school headmaster]

> What every party member wants is only for his own party leader to be President. [Elderly Muslim man, landowner and former teacher]

> I would not want [the parties] back at all, since those people have a political greediness. [Young Muslim man, petty trader]

These descriptions of political parties cast them as the very antithesis of the principles of legitimate authority and civility outlined in my earlier discussion. Central to this portrayal is the sense that parties violate the regulated hierarchy which anchors the 'democratic' political virtues. By contrast with the positively valorised forms of competition discussed earlier, parties do not compete for limited power within a regulated hierarchy which encompasses the social totality. Instead they form totalities of their own, competing to capture the pinnacle of power itself and thus dominate the entire hierarchy, excluding everyone else from access to it. As totalities of exclusion rather than inclusion, they interpret free speech as a threat to their authority, rendering communication and discussion impossible. And, since a party which acquires power has no transcendent anchor or status, it is destined to remain mired in partisanship and unable to judge conflicts impartially.

This fundamental coherence of the vilification of political parties with local conceptions of political legitimacy demonstrates that Ganda hostility

towards parties is no historical accident. It should not, however, be taken to
imply that it was inevitable, or that it is necessarily irreversible. Historical
events such as the formation of Kabaka Yekka and Obote's abolition of the
kingship served to inflame and consolidate the initially uneasy reception of
parties and party-based elections. The NRM's successful implementation of
a non-party political structure and its propagation of an anti-party ideology
during the past decade have further reinforced it.

A DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE

When it came to power in 1986 the NRM instituted throughout Uganda a
new form of local government developed during the civil war in the areas
under its control. The Resistance Council (RC) system was composed at the
local level (RC1) of the entire adult population of a given village, which
elected nine-member executive committees to run local affairs. Village
executives combined as parish (RC2) councils to elect RC2 executives, and
so on up to the district (RC5) level and the National Resistance Council
(NRC; parliament). Candidacies were based strictly on individual merit and
repute—not (at least explicitly) on affiliation with the suspended political
parties. Voting was public, by queuing behind the candidate of one's choice.
Positions on each executive were reserved for historically marginalised
groups: women and youth. At the local level in particular, these councils
took over many of the administrative and judicial functions of the civil
service chiefship, and served as a check upon its remaining functions. The
RC statutes also included the right of popular recall of lower-level elected
officials.[15]

The RC system was praised by most of my informants, and was certainly
judged 'democratic' by their standards. Their praise, however, was virtually
never based on the fact that RC executives were democratically elected. In
fact, when asked to compare the old chiefship system under the monarchy
with the RC system, most insisted that the two were identical, since their
functions and hierarchical structure were the same.

> [These systems] seem very similar. Because in the old form of rule we had village
> chiefs and parish chiefs, and higher up there were sub-county and county chiefs.
> When you compare with the RCs you can see that the RC1 chief is like the village
> chief, the RC2 is the parish chief, RC3 the sub-county chief, and upwards like that.
> You can see that their tasks and workings are very similar. [Older Catholic man,
> well-to-do, private surveyor, RC2 chairman]

> It seems there isn't much difference, because the chiefs were there too, ruling their
> villages, and they called people to court when there were charges, and they
> decided cases, and if a case was too difficult they would send you to the
> magistrate's court. [Middle-aged Catholic man, tenant farmer]

Informants frequently described both systems as constructed in the bottom-
up manner which I have identified as a central ideological characteristic of
the Ganda clan system and of Ganda hierarchism in general:

The councils are likely to co-operate with royal rule, because the *kabaka*'s government appointed the village chiefs from the bottom and up to the parish and sub-county, but when you look closely you see that these things are practically the same. [Older Muslim man, tenant farmer]

There is no great difference. In the *kabaka*'s time they would also choose [*balonda*] a local person . . . to rule the village. And it seems to be the same nowadays. [Older Catholic man, tenant farmer]

[The councils] are very similar to the rule of the kingship, since they are chosen [*balondebwa*] from below and reach up to the top. Just like under the *kabaka* the village chief began at the bottom and was chosen because he was known within the parish. And likewise with these councils, when they see that someone is capable they choose him. [Older Muslim man, prosperous tenant farmer]

There has evidently been a fusion in popular consciousness between these two systems of local government, both viewed as highly legitimate by contrast with the centralised and oppressive administrative system during the two decades from 1967 to 1986. Both systems have in turn been assimilated to the valorised conception of structural hierarchy, with its core features of bottom-up construction and regulated competition.

There is a further distinction whose absence is even more crucial here: that between election and selection. The fact that both, in Luganda, are *okulonda* makes it possible, as in the last two statements above, to speak of the old chiefs and the current RC executives as 'chosen' without adverting to the fact that the former were appointed from above, whereas the latter are popularly elected. The expression meaning 'to vote' (*okukuba akalulu*) was rarely if ever used by my informants in discussing these issues. Such systematic inattention to the manner in which officials are selected speaks, once again, to the assimilation of democratic practices to existing conceptions of legitimate governance with their prioritisation of the values of communication, justice and hierarchical civility.

But if the manner in which chiefs and councillors are chosen is not central to the way in which rural Baganda conceive of relations of power and authority, this is not to say that they are unaware of the distinction between election and selection. When pressed specifically on the issue, most of my informants expressed an unqualified preference for popular election. This was generally true even of those who had initially insisted most strenuously on the identity of the two systems and praised the old chiefship system most unequivocally:

Q. There is no difference between these systems at all?
A. There is no difference, they are the same.
Q. And in the way they are selected [*ennonda*]?
A. This *ennonda* is good.
Q. Is it better than the old one?
A. That one was also good.
Q. But do you think this *ennonda* is better than under the kingship?

A. This *ennonda* is better for the current age [*mulembe*], which is how we measure
things now, because in the old days they would just tell us we were still
children, but now that we have seen this system we see that it is better.
                              [Middle-aged Protestant man, RC2 chairman, well educated]

Q. Do you prefer one system to the other?
A. No. They are equal because they rule in the same way.
Q. Is there any difference in the *ennonda* of the old chiefs and that of the RCs?
A. The old *ennonda* was somewhat oppressive. In that one it was just 'I am giving
you this parish.' But now they sit down together first.
Q. Which is better?
A. The best system is for people to be satisfied. They could bring someone you
didn't know at all and just impose him on you, but now you choose someone
you know. . . . Nowadays the person who rules ought to be chosen by the
people.
                              [Elderly Muslim cleric, minimal schooling]

This general but rather weakly articulated preference for democratic
elections suggests an emerging contradiction. Whereas elections and
democratic political representation figure only marginally among the
political values to which rural Baganda express a commitment, these
institutions have evidently gained considerable popular allegiance at a more
pragmatic level. While the legitimacy of the RC system has not been
conceived of as founded primarily on their democratic election, such election
has nevertheless for the first time been *experienced* as a viable means of
achieving the predominant political ideals of justice, communication and
civility. This experience has generated widespread support for democratic
elections without, thus far, elevating democratic representation to the status
of a core political value in its own right.

   This contradiction may or may not produce lasting changes in Ganda
political culture, either undermining its hierarchism or creating a new
amalgam of democratic and hierarchical elements. What I find particularly
significant is the fact that the new standing of electoral democracy in popular
political consciousness is at least partially the product of government
policies which have created a new and unusual democratic space in Uganda
during the past decade—policies which articulate in a variety of ways with
popular political concepts, ideals and expectations.

DEMOCRACY WITHOUT PARTIES: THE NRM EXPERIMENT

Chief among the NRM's democratic reforms has been the RC system.
Despite the much longer history of sporadic elections in Uganda, it is only
with its introduction that elections have become a reliable feature of
Ugandan political life. For the first time since independence, elections have
been held at regular intervals, first with the formation of RCs in 1986, then
nationally in 1989 and 1992, and with frequent local by-elections to fill
vacant posts or reconstitute dissolved or recalled executive committees.[16]
Since previous Ugandan governments ran local affairs through centrally
appointed civil service chiefs, it is also the RC system which has provided

Ugandans with their first significant experience of democratic governance at
the local level. As I have tried to show, this pyramidal system of indirect
representation is eminently assimilable to the Ganda model of legitimate
authority as constructed from the bottom up and founded on nested
solidarities. It is also the first electoral system to resonate with the local
preference for regulated, as opposed to total, competition. Within it,
competition is simultaneously promoted and contained within certain
boundaries. More specifically, since political parties are excluded from it,
the RC system has not been perceived as a vehicle for the manipulation and
exacerbation of religious and ethnic divisions. Virtually all my informants
were adamant about the incompatibility of political parties with the RC
system and the local unity and solidarity that it has produced.

   In its pursuit of an alternative to multi-party democracy the NRM has in
some respects evolved in accord with local political conceptions at the
national level as well. Upon coming to power the NRM insisted on its status
as an inclusive 'movement' and invited prominent political figures of
virtually all stripes to participate in a 'broad-based' government. Since no
Ugandan could be excluded from participation in the movement as initially
defined, and leading figures from each of the old parties did join the new
government, the NRM was interpreted as a hierarchy of inclusion rather than
exclusion. The NRM's adherence to the principle of free speech (particularly
with regard to the press) also resonated with popular priorities, while its
suspension of the freedom of association aroused few objections among a
populace for whom this freedom does not figure as a central political value.
The NRM also embarked upon a massive project of popular consultation in
the process of formulating a new Ugandan constitution. This involved the
appointment of a Constitutional Commission which conducted seminars at
sub-county level throughout the country, collected some 25,000 submissions,
and produced a draft constitution based on popular views. Subsequently a
Constituent Assembly was elected by direct ballot in 1994 to debate, amend
and ratify the commission's draft (Hansen and Twaddle, 1994; Regan,
1995).[17]

   If certain democratic practices have gained a new popularity in the past
ten years, it is partly because they have been implemented more system-
atically and with greater genuine commitment by the NRM than by any
previous government. But it is also in part because the form of their
implementation articulates significantly with local political values and
conceptions.[18] Elections under the RC system make sense to ordinary
Baganda in a way that previous electoral practices did not, and certain of the
NRM's national policies have endowed them with a frame of legitimacy
which previous regimes never possessed in Buganda. This has been a
democratisation programme running with the grain of local political culture
rather than against it, demonstrating that even a broadly undemocratic
culture contains elements which can be deployed in a democratic direction.

   The future of the NRM's experiment with no-party democracy, however,
is now in some doubt. The success and legitimacy of many of the above-
mentioned policies and institutions were based on the NRM's relatively
consistent adherence to its own no-party philosophy. In its party-style
campaign for the 1994 Constituent Assembly elections, in its subsequent

claim to have 'won' them, in its 1995 purge of most prominent non-NRM politicians from the Cabinet, its majoritarian unwillingness to compromise on controversial issues in the Constituent Assembly, and its unabashed skewing of the electoral rules for 1996, it has acted in rather stark contradiction of its own stated ideology (Kasfir, 1994; Regan, 1995).

Nevertheless, the NRM's non-party political system and ideology remain convincing among Baganda. In the Constituent Assembly elections Buganda (like much of the rest of the country) endorsed them by electing a decisive majority of delegates in favour of extending the system for another five years and conducting the 1996 presidential election under the same stipulation of individual candidacy. Despite a subsequent rift in the NRM–Buganda alliance over the issue of Buganda's administrative autonomy ('federalism') in the 1995 constitution, and the emergence of the Democratic Party leader Paul Ssemogerere (himself a Muganda) as the joint candidate for the pro-party opposition in the 1996 presidential contest, there appears to have been no significant increase in enthusiasm for political parties among Baganda during the past two years. President Museveni won an unexpectedly high 79·5 per cent of the Buganda vote in the May 1996 election, and my follow-up interviews indicate that enduring scepticism towards the old parties was one of the primary reasons for this outcome.[19]

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the reception of democracy in Buganda, both in conception and in practice, must be understood with reference to an existing socio-political cosmology. While the *concept* of democracy has been largely assimilated to local conceptions and thereby purged of some of its emancipatory content, there is also evidence that recent experience with democratic *practice*, particularly democratic elections, is beginning to challenge and change some of those conceptions. This impact has been made possible in significant part by the government's implementation of innovative democratic reforms and policies which articulate with local values and understandings. Their relative success suggests that whereas much academic analysis pins its hopes of democratisation in Africa to the emergence of Western-style institutions of civil society and an attendant Western-style democratic culture, equal attention, at the very least, should be paid to the compatibility of democratic reforms with existing political cultures.[20]

If democracy based on periodic elections contested by political parties is unlikely to take root, at least in the near term, in Uganda and perhaps elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa as well, the countries of the subcontinent may seem destined to remain relatively undemocratic. But such a conclusion rests on an untenably universalist conception of democracy.[21] Because the democratic project is everywhere emergent and incomplete, the West, despite its historical priority, can claim no monopoly of its current and future forms or definitions. Contemporary African reluctance to reduce political communication to party-based elections speaks to challenges currently faced by even the oldest democracies, and some of the recent innovations in Uganda open up novel possibilities for addressing them. In a time of apathy

and disillusionment in many older democracies, perhaps it is only mildly quixotic to suggest that African political ingenuity may help us re-ignite our own democratic imaginations.

NOTES

[1] See Nursey-Bray (1983) and Staniland (1986) for overviews of this earlier consensus.

[2] In a recent review of this literature Robinson emphasises the neglect of 'norms, customs, and symbols of power, . . . culture, local knowledge and their impact on participation' (1994a: 62).

[3] Miles (1988), Owusu (1992), Schatzberg (1993), Robinson (1994b), van Binsbergen (1995), Schaffer (1994); the emerging attention to political culture among proponents of the civil society paradigm (Chazan, 1993; Bratton and Liatto-Katundu, 1994), while salutary, is vitiated by reliance on Almond and Verba's (1963) approach.

[4] Interviews were conducted at two main sites during an eighteen-month period in 1992–93—in Ngando sub-county, Mpigi District, a primarily Muslim area, and in Katabi sub-county, near Entebbe town, in Mpigi District, with a religiously mixed population—and during shorter visits in 1993 to Nakaseke sub-county, Luwero District (predominantly Anglican), and the rural environs of Masaka town (Catholic). Approximately 100 recorded interviews were conducted, all with ethnic Baganda, and all in Luganda unless otherwise noted.

[5] Western conceptions of democracy are of course complex and historically variable (Williams, 1983), but for my purpose here the core elements of 'rule of the people' (or majority rule), egalitarian conceptions of citizenship and political representation via party-based elections are most salient.

[6] The Oxford English Dictionary dates each of the usages of 'civility' which interest me here—good governance, conduct becoming a citizen, collective advancement, and courtesy, decency, good breeding—to the sixteenth century.

[7] I use single quotation marks to indicate English words used in a Luganda context.

[8] Per Tidemand and I conducted research simultaneously in Buganda and shared a concern with conceptions of democracy and popular political participation. I am grateful to him for much stimulation in the field and for access to the original text of this passage.

[9] This is the standard telling of the story. According to Ssemakula Kiwanuka, a leading historian of pre-colonial Uganda, it is apocryphal aside from Mukaabya's adoption of the name Muteesa soon after consolidating his hold on the throne, and his occasional acts of public cruelty (Kaggwa, 1971: 144–5).

[10] As Azarya (1994: 88–90) points out, this ethical dimension has been almost completely ignored by the proponents of 'civil society' in African studies.

[11] This notion connects etymologically and conceptually with that of a bottom-up structure as well, since the root of entikko and amatikkira is okutikka (to carry, especially on the head), which is what the Buffalo clansmen quite literally do for the king in hoisting him on to their shoulders during his installation.

[12] The centrality of clanship in modelling these elements of Ganda hierarchism should not be taken as a reflection of the real salience of clanship in ordering social relations, which was

already eroding during the nineteenth century, and was found by Richards (1955) and Southwold (1959) to be largely a nostalgic myth by the 1950s. Nor should the projection of contemporary conceptions of the clan-king system on to the pre-colonial past be taken at face value: in pre-colonial Buganda there was an element of structural opposition in the relationship between the clans and the king (Southwold, 1961) which was eliminated under colonial conditions. These caveats notwithstanding, I think Welbourn (1965: iv) was right in criticising Fallers *et al.* (1964) for underestimating the enduring importance of clanship in Buganda, since its weakness as an organising sociological principle does not negate its conceptually orienting role.

[13] The following discussion relies on Apter (1961), Low (1962), Welbourn (1965), Mamdani (1976), Kasfir (1976) and Young (1977).

[14] Religion was established as one of the central axes of social cleavage in Uganda and Buganda at the very start of the colonial period.

[15] The fullest recent discussions are Ddungu (1994), Brett (1992: chapter 3), Barya and Oloka-Onyango (1994) and Tidemand (1995); Mamdani (1994) provides an incisive analysis of the democratic potential and limitations of the RC system. Under the 1995 constitution the RCs have been renamed Local Councils (LCs).

[16] See Kasfir (1991) on the 1989 elections for the most extensive analysis of any of the RC-based elections.

[17] This process also appealed to the contractarian element of Ganda political culture emphasised by Kokole and Mazrui (1988).

[18] It should be emphasised that Museveni and the NRM do not by any means conceive themselves as adopting indigenous political forms or idioms. In fact their attitude to popular political culture is distinctly dismissive.

[19] I spent the month of May 1996 in Uganda as part of an election observation mission.

[20] While Africa is a highly heterogeneous continent, some recent literature suggests parallels elsewhere with elements of Ganda political culture and the reception of democracy in Buganda. Among Senegalese Wolof there is a similar stigmatisation of 'politics' as divisive and destructive, and a strongly consensualist approach to elections (Schaffer, 1994). In the Nokoya kingdoms of western Zambia there has been resistance to elections as 'morally and cosmologically obscene' for implying that 'political office [can] be bought for promises, favors and money' (van Binsbergen, 1995: 17). Miles (1988) documents considerable ambivalence towards political parties in northern Nigeria. Schatzberg (1993: 449–50) cites Kenyan and Zairean conceptions of power as singular and indivisible. Botswanans remain deeply committed to political communication in the *kgotla* (village assembly) and continue to view multi-party elections and open political contestation with considerable suspicion despite Botswana's record as one of Africa's more successful liberal democracies (van Binsbergen, 1995; cf. Comaroff, 1994; 35; Somolekae, 1989: 85). In fact, Botswana is perhaps the one exception to my generalisation about the failure to craft locally coherent forms of democracy (Holm, 1988), although there is some question as to the genuinely democratic thrust of the state-sponsored *kgotla* system (van Binsbergen, 1995: 24); Ghana has also made a few attempts in this direction (Owusu, 1992).

[21] The limitations of both universalist and relativist approaches to the study of democracy outside its historic homelands are set out very clearly by van Binsbergen (1995: 4–6).

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ABSTRACT

Most of the recent literature on democratisation in Africa has paid insufficient attention to popular understandings of democracy and the local reception of democratic practices. This article examines the articulation of the concept of democracy with existing socio-political conceptions in contemporary Buganda. The standard translation of the word 'democracy' into Luganda tends to assimilate it to a local political cosmology which emphasises the values of justice, civility and open communication between rulers and subjects, and involves a conception of socio-political hierarchy modelled on the system of clans and kingship. Key ideological features of this conception include its construction from the bottom up, the singularity of power, regulated competition and nested solidarities. Such liberal democratic practices and institutions as elections, political parties and representation are not part of the local definition of democracy. In fact, political parties are widely condemned as antithetical to democratic governance. At a more pragmatic level, however, some of the democratisation initiatives of the current Ugandan government have given rise to a new popular allegiance to democratic elections. These reforms are unusual in that they resonate significantly with local political values and conceptions. The article suggests that more attention should be devoted to the coherence of democratisation initiatives with local socio-political conceptions.

RÉSUMÉ

La plupart de la littérature récente sur la démocratisation en Afrique n'a prêté assez d'attention aux compréhensions populaires de la démocratie et à la manière dont les pratiques démocratiques sont reçues localement. Cet article examine l'articulation du concept de la démocratie au sein des conceptions socio-politiques au Buganda contemporain. La traduction correcte du mot 'démocratie' en Luganda a tendance à l'assimiler à une cosmologie politique locale qui met l'accent sur les valeurs de justice, civilité, et communication ouverte entre les dirigeants et leurs sujets, et implique une conception de la hiérarchie socio-politique copiée sur le système des clans et leurs souverains. Les charactéristiques idéologiques principales de cette conception sont sa construction du début à la fin, la singularité du pouvoir, une compétition régularisée, et des solidarités bien nichés. Des pratiques et institutions libérales telles que les élections, les partis politiques, et la représentation ne font pas parti de la définition locale de la démocratie. En fait, les partis politiques sont largement condamnés comme étant antithétiques à un gouvernement démocratique. A un niveau plus pragmatique, cependant, certaines initiatives de démocratisation de la part du gouvernement ugandais ont donné lieu à une nouvelle allégeance populaire aux élections démocratiques. Ces réformes sont inhabituelles parce qu'elles ont une résonance significative avec les valeurs et conceptions politiques locales. Cet article suggère que l'on devrait prêter plus d'attention à la cohérence des initiatives de démocratisation avec les conceptions socio-politiques locales.