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Amin reframed: the UK, Uganda, and the human rights 'breakthrough' of the 1970s

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Abstract *This article explores the role of human rights discourse in reframing the changing diplomatic relationship of the United Kingdom and Uganda during Idi Amin's dictatorship of 1971-1979. The emergence of a violent military dictatorship in Uganda in the early 1970s posed difficult questions for Britain, which had played a central role in the creation of the Ugandan nation-state in the colonial era and maintained many connections to it. In the first years of Amin's rule the UK had adopted a pragmatic stance, in which human rights concerns were not considered, and geopolitical and economic concerns came first. However, in the mid 1970s the emergence of an energetic transnational 'community of conscience' contributed to a reframing of the UK's stance on Uganda in explicit human rights terminology. This was a limited and sometimes contradictory shift that also served to obscure embarrassing aspects of the UK-Uganda relationship.*

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the emergence of human rights discourse in the 1970s and its relation to Idi Amin's military government in Uganda, 1971-1979, and its diplomatic relationship with the United Kingdom (UK), former colonial ruler of Uganda. It will be argued that the 1970s 'breakthrough' of human rights discourse can be identified in the archival record on Amin's Uganda. In the early 1970s, the UK's foreign policy as regards Idi Amin was free of human rights terminology, and was determined by longstanding geopolitical interests, post-colonial ties, and a desire to manage international reputation and the wellbeing of UK citizens in Uganda carefully. In the mid 1970s, the emergence of popular Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) with an emphasis on human rights saw increasing pressure placed on Amin's violent and authoritarian regime by Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists, and an ascendant, transnational 'community of conscience' (a term coined by Buchanan) that also inspired several Ugandan exile groups to adopt human rights discourse. In the late 1970s, under the new Foreign Secretary David Owen, the UK began to 'talk the talk' on human rights abuses in Uganda and made some minor changes to its foreign policy as regards Amin in response. Nonetheless, these changes

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were partial and limited, an ahistorical reframing of post-colonial connections and legacies for which Britain was more responsible than it liked to admit.

Methodologically, this article triangulates archival notes and secondary materials gathered by the author in his own research on political violence in Amin's Uganda with the emerging secondary literature on the history of human rights, and their relationship to foreign policy. The intention here is to bring these two quite different bodies of ideas into dialogue with one another. That Uganda was condemned as a 'torture state' in the 1970s, and that there was public outcry over abuses of human rights under Amin's rule is well known, but Uganda receives little mention in recent texts on the emergence of human rights in this decade. It will be argued here that the Ugandan case is pertinent precisely because the 1970s 'breakthrough' of human rights discourse into international affairs served to reshape the UK-Uganda relationship from the mid 1970s onwards. Transnational advocacy networks such as Amnesty International played an important role both in driving an increased focus on human rights questions, and in collaborating with the UK government as it too adopted a more vocal stance on human rights in the late 1970s. It will also be argued that meaningful change was limited, and that despite a lack of substantive policy change this shift nonetheless served the UK as it sought to reframe a difficult and embarrassing post-colonial relationship. The importance of African agency at both a state and non-state level will also be demonstrated. Ugandan President Idi Amin had a directly deleterious effect on UK-Uganda relations, sought to mitigate and co-opt human rights discourse for his own purposes, and was ultimately outflanked and overthrown by Julius Nyerere's Tanzania. In the late 1970s a 'community of conscience' also developed in the Ugandan exile community, as small Ugandan rights groups emerged and readily adopted and employed human rights language themselves.

The findings are organised into five sections. The relationship of the article to existing human rights literature is outlined first, before section two draws on secondary literature to trace the deeper historical connections between the UK and Uganda, and the pre-colonial and colonial origins of the political crises of the Ugandan state since independence. The third section explores the first two years of diplomatic relations between Idi Amin's military regime in Uganda and the UK government, before human rights discourse became a significant shaping force in the relationship. Section four traces the emergence of a small 'community of conscience', a constellation of NGOs and sympathetic journalists seeking to document violence and rights abuses in Uganda and draw international attention to it, with explicit human rights focused terminology. The final section examines the limited extent to which this transnational advocacy network impacted UK foreign policy. It will be argued that although the UK began to 'talk the talk' on human rights, reframing its relationship to Amin's Uganda in these terms and beginning to collaborate more with international NGOs on the question of rights abuses, substantial policy changes proved elusive.

The human rights 'breakthrough' and Amin's Uganda

This article combines archival and primary materials from the UK national archives and Uganda, to explore the role that human rights language played in the changing diplomatic relationship between the UK and Uganda during

Idi Amin's eight-year military dictatorship. As a post-colonial state that underwent considerable upheaval and experienced dramatic levels of political violence during the 1970s, an era identified elsewhere as a 'breakthrough' moment for human rights, Uganda constitutes a pertinent case study for exploring the changing nature of human rights discourse and its relationship to foreign policy in the UK. Livingstone's study of the changing UK relationship to Chile and Argentina in the Pinochet era has been instructive in highlighting that even in an era of increased human rights related dialogue, which was having some undeniable effects, UK foreign policy interests were often entrenched and difficult for outsider groups to impact (Livingston 2018). This article begins the work of situating Amin's Uganda within this broader shift in rights discourse and its relationship to foreign policy. The Ugandan case also offers some contrast to those of Chile and Argentina, as the post-colonial ties the UK had to Uganda shaped the exchanges of the 1970s in important ways.

It has been asserted in recent scholarship that the 1970s constituted a 'breakthrough' moment for human rights (Eckel and Moyn 2013). This has been attributed to several factors, including the vacuum presented by the decline of (and public disillusionment with) the Cold War ideologies, and the emergence and ascendancy of NGOs that championed individual liberties and documented and criticised the abuses of states around the world, including Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) (Moyn 2010, 7; Buchanan 2004, 2020). Buchanan emphasises that such organizations and their collaborators constituted an emergent 'community of conscience' and fulfilled a need in those contributing and donating to them for a more straightforward moral cause amidst the disillusionment of the Cold War, particularly after the suppression of Czechoslovakia by the USSR and the student protests of 1968 (Ibid). Transnational advocacy networks emerged to fill a new role in building links between disparate interest groups, contributing to the convergence of new norms, and transforming and 'reframing' the terms and nature of political debates at the international level (Keck and Sikkink 1999).

Though some of these global networks had important roots in the 1960s (Thorn 2006), they enjoyed unparalleled success in putting across their ideas and setting the terms of the human rights conversation from the mid 1970s onwards. One must be careful to avoid regarding this as too all-encompassing a 'big bang' moment (Jensen 2016). Human rights did not emerge from nowhere, and had enjoyed decades of groundwork within the UN (United Nations) and the emerging anti-colonial and post-colonial discourse of the global south (Ibid.; Burke 2010). Imperial powers like Britain had had a conflicted relationship with Human Rights for decades prior, as they battled the contradictory demands of maintaining control of colonial territories and extending such rights (Klose 2013). Nonetheless, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate the role of increasingly influential transnational advocacy networks in actively reframing how Amin's regime was understood and perceived on human rights grounds in the mid 1970s. Archival materials from the UK demonstrate that the 'community of conscience' contributed to a notable shift in discourse during the mid 1970s as regards the military dictatorship in Uganda. It will also be argued that, although the UK began to 'talk the talk' on human rights in Uganda during this period as a result, this had limited impact on its policies towards the Amin regime and was a largely superficial change.

Human Rights are a 'hardy' and adaptable set of concepts that filled a gap left by the retreating utopian ideologies of communism and capitalism (Moyn 2010, 126). They had existed in some form or another for some time but had failed to register widely beyond the auspices of the UN (Ibid.). Indeed, many in the developing world regarded that the UN itself had done much more to uphold the existing world order and questions of sovereignty since its inception than to champion conceptions of personal freedom (Terretta 2012). Despite much early opposition to the extension of fundamental rights to formerly colonised territories (Eckert 2012), it became easier over time for European powers to take a moralistic stance, freed of some of the contradictory demands of maintaining empire, a distinctly illiberal enterprise, whilst reconciling idealistic visions of the future that had kept them quiet on rights in the post-war era. This was attendant with a reframing of sovereignty at an international level towards being a right, rather than something contingent on a particular level of development (Grant 2013). This shift coincided from the 1960s onwards with the increasing agency and clout of many newly independent countries in the Global South that also sought to push forward the agenda on human rights within the UN (Jensen 2016, 5). The Amin case, examined below, is demonstrative of this shift, as the UK began in the 1970s to readily employ rights discourse in its dealings with a former protectorate.

The reasons for the adoption of human rights discourse varies and involves the input and ambitions of a range of actors. The abstract and ahistorical nature of rights discourse is part of its political and social appeal and has proved one of its great strengths. Rights discourse is malleable enough to fit to a wide array of contexts, without posing uncomfortable questions about their deeper histories. However, it could also be a weakness, as those seeking to implement human rights ideas more consistently soon found themselves up against entrenched interests and complex political realities that defied quick and easy solutions (Brier 2015). This was a messy, impartial, and often contradictory process, and exactly how human rights were understood and enacted varied enormously from place to place, and person to person (Bradley 2014). In Amin's Uganda, it will be argued, a rapidly collapsing diplomatic relationship proved fertile ground for human rights discourse to take root. On the British side, this led the FCO to utilise rights discourse to reframe an awkward post-colonial relationship as a moral concern. But rights were also a tool that Ugandans sought to use for their own purposes too, as a small constellation of rights groups invoked it to challenge the Amin dictatorship, which itself attempted to co-opt rights language for its own purposes, to draw in outside support against (or to support) the military government. Though these groups leave only a small footprint in the archive, they are notable for representing the beginnings of a Ugandan human rights community that is far more entrenched in the country today (Dicklitch and Lwanda 2003).

The UK, Uganda, and Amin in historical perspective

Historical literature on sub-Saharan Africa, on Uganda, and Idi Amin's military government specifically has much to offer the study of human rights and their relationship to foreign policy. Human rights discourse, like other contemporary humanitarian terminology, represents an abstract moral language that

can sometimes have limited explanatory value for analysing the situations that rights activists seek to raise awareness of, and intervene in. (Mamdani 2007, 2011). In particular, the ways in which violence and conflict in Africa is named, represented, and coded by outsiders has for centuries been a tool through which Africa, and Africans have been dehumanised and ruled (Reid 2007, 2012). Ibhawoh has argued strongly against a streamlined telling of the human rights 'story', and the need for a long duree approach that recognises the complexities of African histories and societies (Ibhawoh 2017). As a post-colonial state, any analysis of Uganda must recognise the interconnected history it shares with Britain, and the important shaping role both of external imperial powers and of powerful pre-colonial societies in establishing the contemporary Ugandan nation-state (Reid 2017). African agency, whilst generally exercised in 'tight corners', must also always be considered when analysing African interaction with outside forces, and a singularly 'top-down' view of foreign affairs and the implementation of human rights may risk neglecting this agency (Lonsdale 2000). The strategies adopted by African leaders and civilians to engage with the imbalanced power and resources of the outside world, defined by Bayart & Ellis as strategies of 'extraversion,' may offer us important insights into how and why diplomatic relations change and new ideas spread, and the agency and ambitions of African actors in these processes (Bayart and Ellis 2000).

These insights are extremely relevant to any study of Idi Amin's Uganda. Idi Amin has wide cultural resonance in the west, where he has presented as an exotic 'symbol of evil' for decades (Leopold 2009, 2020). He has served as a caricature of African military rule, of excess, and of madness, and sensational myths and rumours from his time in power have too often been allowed to stand as undisputed fact. Recent writing on Amin has shifted focus from his larger-than-life persona and towards a broader and deeper understanding of his government. Focus has been placed on the function, fragility and limitations of the Ugandan state that he ruled over, rather than the totalitarian power invoked by his contemporary critics (Peterson and Taylor 2013). Amin's own personality and the nature of his regime have been revisited, and the role of performance, masculinity, and the militarization of Uganda in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial period have been identified as key facets of his rule (Decker 2014; Leopold 2006; Hansen 2013). Amin, his support base, and the deteriorating coercive institutions which he seized power of, and lost control of, are legacies and products of British colonial rule, a fact that was all too often downplayed and ignored in contemporary analysis of his government, and that underpinned much of the bitterness directed by Amin at Britain during his reign. (Leopold 2020; Lowman 2020). Amin also enjoyed more agency in international affairs than is often accorded to him, causing enormous disruption to British foreign policy as he became disillusioned with the country he had once served under (Leopold 2020).

Uganda and the United Kingdom share a deep, interconnected history, that bears consideration before any exploration of their changing relationship in the 1970s. Uganda itself is a post-colonial state, an amalgamation of territories and peoples that owes its existence as a single nation-state to the interaction of British conquest and colonization with the ambitions and fortunes of a number of kingdoms and ethnic groups with longstanding pre-colonial roots and

histories at the end of the nineteenth century. The relationship between military force and political power, the nature and strength of Uganda's institutions, and the social makeup of the country, all of which played vital roles in contributing to the escalation of political conflict (and what would become termed rights abuses) in Uganda after independence, cannot be understood without reference to the changes wrought by the colonial era, and its effect on long-running pre-colonial processes.

The role of force, and the role of the military in politics was an overt one during conquest and colonial rule itself. The British under Lord Lugard relied on mercenary fighters from Sudan and North-Western Uganda in the preliminary stages of colonial conquest in the area (Reid 2017, 151). At the turn of the 20th century, it was shrewd collaboration between British forces and the powerful kingdom of Buganda that made possible the conquest and consolidation of the constituent regions of the contemporary Ugandan state (Ibid., 155). This should be understood as a bilateral, 'Anglo-Ganda' conquest, in which the British gained a protectorate in June 1894, but were also drawn into the pre-existing ambitions of a local power. (Ibid., 157). Though the projection of force rather than its use was the preference of the British, here as elsewhere, there were punitive campaigns against the Bunyoro in the late 1890s and the Acholi in the North in 1911-1912. Violence, and punishments were readily dealt out by the colonial army and the colonial state as it established itself in power. The direct relationship between armed force and political power, itself a consistent feature of pre-colonial politics in the region, was reified in the colonial 'pax' the British now imposed through armed might (Ibid.).

Uganda's future president, Idi Amin, and the soldiers that would form his regime in the 1970s were themselves products of processes and cultures of militarism and violence set in motion by British territorial ambitions in East Africa. In the consolidation of colonial rule the British utilised large numbers of soldiers drawn from the ethnic groups of Sudan and the West Nile region of what is now Uganda, including the Lugbara, Madi, and Kakwa (Leopold 2006, 181; Kokole 1985; Nasseem and Wahb Marjan 1992). An alternative 'ethnic' identity commonly referred to in Uganda as 'Nubian' emerged amongst these soldiers, cutting across existing language ties through mutual bonds of military service, Islamic faith, and adoption of the 'KiNubi' trading language (Ibid.) Nubians and West Nilers became heavily involved in the military, prisons, and police, all the most coercive instruments of the state, and stereotypes and representations of them as particularly militaristic and violent emerged and were reified in response (Ibid.). Soldiers like Amin assisted the British forces in putting down rebellions throughout East Africa, including the Mau-Mau rebellion in Kenya as late as the 1950s, a conflict that saw considerable use of torture and executions by the colonial state against the indigenous population (Grahame 1980) (Anderson 2005).

The nation-state that Ugandans inherited from the British at independence was an imbalanced and fragile one, uneasily combining the successors of powerful pre-colonial kingdoms in the south and myriad smaller and more diffuse language groups under vulnerable institutions with limited legitimacy and reach (Lwanga-Lunyiigo 1987). The struggle to forge a 'national' identity in the face of these many divergent interests has been a source of conflict throughout Uganda's independent history as a result. The coercive apparatus

of the military inherited from Britain was heavily staffed by a handful of northern ethnic groups, had little to no experienced or formally educated officers, and had itself been a political instrument of colonial rule (Parsons 2003). These were the background conditions that prompted a series of strikes and conflicts during the 1960s, before pro-Amin elements in the military overthrew the civilian government of Milton Obote in 1971, placing Idi Amin in power (Baynham 1990; Omara-Otunnu 1987). Significant violence and rights abuses followed, but these should be understood not just as the work of Amin and his regime, but as a product of deteriorating discipline and institutional function, opportunistic localised violence, and intermittent 'spikes' of regime directed violence in key moments of insecurity (Lowman 2020).

'A ship adrift': the UK and Uganda, 1971–1973

Questions of human rights were not influential in the shifting UK-Uganda relationship of the early 1970s. Rather a paternalistic, post-colonial attitude towards the Amin regime defined early engagement with it by the UK. Initial optimism and collaboration in the wake of the military seizing power quickly gave way over a period of years to caution and pessimism about Amin's prospects of survival, much less his capacity to govern Uganda. Initially many believed that that with the right influences, training and supplies, the military government could be steered towards better conduct, and a mode of rule that would benefit Britain. Nobody did more to disabuse onlookers of this notion than Amin himself and his supporters in the military. Optimism wilted in the face of mounting evidence of mass violence and repression by Amin's soldiery as they consolidated their hold on power, disordered Uganda's fragile institutions, and crushed dissenters with force. Violence against civilians, and many abuses that would later be termed human rights abuses were documented with alarm by the FCO in these early years. However, FCO communications in the early 1970s are free of human rights terminology. Despite mounting concerns about events in the country, complex geopolitical, diplomatic, and economic considerations ensured that the maintenance of cordial relations remained the priority.

Sub-Saharan Africa had already experienced several military takeovers by the time Idi Amin was announced as a caretaker President in January 1971 (Gutteridge 1975; Decalo 1976; Reid 2012). Cold War concerns and anxiety over the direction of travel for Africa's new states, in particular a suspicion towards any independent African leaders adopting a more left leaning stance, ensured that British, French, and American responses to these early coups was often a positive one (Ibid.). African militaries had not yet disgraced themselves with decades of misrule, and there was significant faith invested in the idea that this most 'Westernised' of institutions might serve African states effectively as an instrument of rule (*Daily Express*, 26 January 1971). This was exactly the logic that underpinned an initial acceptance and encouragement by the British government of Idi Amin's takeover. The leader Amin had supplanted, Apollo Milton Obote, had not endeared himself to the British during his time in power. An internal briefing by S Dawbarn in the East Africa Department summarised things succinctly when he stated that Obote was 'no friend' of Britain (FCO 31/1328, a). A 'move to the left' had seen Obote toying with

nationalisation proposals that threatened to upset established economic interests. Amin's coup, launched pre-emptively to prevent his own arrest and dismissal from the position of army Chief of Staff, was welcome news. Amin was a long serving and decorated officer, had fought for the King's African Rifles against Mau-Mau rebels in the late stages of British colonial rule, and was believed to be malleable (Leopold 2020, 202-3; *Daily Express*, 26 January 1971). The first years of Britain's diplomatic relationship to Amin's Uganda was to be a process of discovering exactly how misplaced any early optimism had been, whilst pragmatically seeking to manage expectations and mitigate potential embarrassment.

The 1971 coup itself had been far from bloodless, and significant violence within the Ugandan military followed shortly after. Amin's support base was narrow and volatile from the outset, constituting a small circle of lower ranking officers within the Uganda Army and Military Police, most of them drawn from the cluster of minority ethnic groups hailing from West Nile, a tiny North-Western frontier region that had only been amalgamated into Uganda some decades prior. Amin moved to promote a number of these men into a 'plateau' of Lieutenant Colonels he termed his 'Defence Council' in the immediate aftermath of the coup, but their consolidation of power over the Uganda Army took some 12 months and involved the targeted killings of officers and soldiers believed to be loyal to Obote's government, the majority hailing from the Acholi and Langi ethnic groups of Uganda's central North (Lowman 2020, 37-93). In July 1971, fresh killings broke out in several army barracks around the country whilst Amin was on a diplomatic mission to the United Kingdom, and there was a systematic massacre of political prisoners on the Tanzanian border in December 1971. A steady rise in assassinations, arrests, and what came to be euphemistically termed 'disappearances' in 1972, spiking after a failed invasion September of that year by exiled rebels loyal to the Obote government, soon gave lie to any notion that early killings had been an anomaly (Ibid., 93-141). The majority of those targeted were Ugandans, but there were also western casualties in the form of the murders of Nicholas Stroh and Robert Siedle, a journalist and lecturer respectively who attempted to investigate the July 1971 violence at Mbarara barracks. Justice Jones, appointed to investigate their deaths, was forced to flee the country before publishing his findings (*Uganda Argus*, 7 July 1972; FCO 31/1328, a).

British policy in relation to Amin's regime in these early years was defined by pragmatism, and a desire for continuity even in the face of a deteriorating situation. Human Rights discourse is notably absent in archival materials from 1971-1973, though the violence and abuses of Amin's soldiery were being well documented (FCO 31/1328, b; Ibid., c; Ibid., d). Initial attempts were made to provide additional military training to the Uganda Army and later to the Ugandan Police, in the hope that the initial violence of the takeover was simply a symptom of indiscipline and could be stamped out (FCO 31/1369, a). There was considerable anxiety about the correct path to take with what was clearly an unstable and dangerous new government. On the one hand, as M Macoun, an Overseas Police Adviser put it, there was a very real risk of what was termed 'inter-tribal fighting' breaking out again, and the chance that external training might help prevent it (FCO 31/1027, a). On the other there was very real concern about reputation management, and what appropriate level of

support could be given to keep Amin inside without becoming 'irrevocably committed' (Ibid.). Some communications from this early period highlight the endurance of the paternalistic, post-colonial ties between former colony and former protectorate that still overshadowed the British-Ugandan relationship. Writing in August 1971 to instruct that deliveries of Saladin armoured cars be cancelled, but that military training should continue, Lieutenant Colonel B H Bradbrook described Uganda as being 'like a ship adrift', asserting it was Britain's responsibility to 'get it back to port' (FCO 31/1059, a). A focus on restoring discipline, on maintaining longstanding post-colonial connections, and on mitigating embarrassment runs through other early archival materials. Equally recurrent was the recognition that, with a substantial British community living in Uganda, keeping on Amin's good side was paramount to ensure their continued safety (FCO 31/1328, a).

Amin's own ambition and policies made this course impossible to maintain. The regime took the decision to expel Uganda's Asian populace in August 1972, ejecting tens of thousands and causing a substantial refugee crisis (*Daily Express*, 7 August 1972). The UK took in more than 25,000 Ugandan Asians in the following months, and the widespread seizure and redistribution of Asian businesses, including many held by British citizens, quickly destroyed the perception that Amin might be more favourable regarding business and trade than his predecessor. (*Voice of Uganda*, 4 December 1972). The failed September invasion of 1972 left Amin fearful and suspicious of external backing and involvement in the attack. Retaliatory violence was launched against suspected collaborators in the army, police, and civil service, in a fresh wave of detentions and assassinations (Lowman 2020, 93-109). In the months that followed Amin adopted a stridently anti-British tone, accusing them of collaborating with Obote and threatening 'drastic' decisions regarding the British population in Uganda. (*Voice of Uganda*, 7 December 1972). Hostile announcements against white missionaries in the country implied that they too were connected to plots against the government (*Voice of Uganda*, 4 December 1972). In this context British support was wound down. Sir Alec Douglas Home announced an end to British financial aid on 30 November 1972, and a ten-million-pound loan that was in the process of being granted was suspended. (Gitelson 1977, 371). UK-Uganda relations entered the mid 1970s, and the 'breakthrough' of human rights discourse in a state of considerable disrepair.

Ugandan agency in this deteriorating relationship bears consideration and is often neglected or misrepresented. Contrary to the typical depictions of capriciousness or madness, Amin had conducted an unashamedly 'extraverted' pursuit of resources with which to sustain his fragile and illegitimate regime in power in the early 1970s (Ibid.; *Daily Express*, 13 July 1971). He had clearly hoped for backing from both the United Kingdom and Israel, powers with a substantial diplomatic presence in the country at the time of his takeover. His disillusionment with both parties stemmed from unsuccessful visits to secure support in July 1971, a time at which fighting to consolidate his hold on power was very much ongoing (Leopold 2020, 204-5; Decker 2014, 52-5). With these avenues closed to him, only then did he pivot to court the Arab states, particularly Gadhafi's Libya, and the Soviet Union (Ibid.). The anti-British stance he embellished in the years that followed should be seen in the light of the long, shared history that he had doubtless believed would entitle him to greater

backing from the former colonial power under which he had served, and the pervasive instability and insecurity of his regime that necessitated his relentless search for military hardware with which to impose order and control. In much the same way, the changing stance of the UK in relation to questions of human rights, and Uganda itself that was to follow would soon represent a complete reframing, even a wilful downplaying of this interconnected history.

Enter, the ‘community of conscience’: NGOs, human rights and Amin, 1974–1979

A small but committed ‘community of conscience’ begun to steadily gain momentum as regards Amin’s Uganda from the moment he took power but did not gain critical mass until 1974. Some of the first outside attempts to draw attention to the violence of the Amin regime came from UK journalists, including Colin Legum and David Martin of the *London Observer*, who worked to document testimonies of survivors in the early years of the military government, including a handful of Ugandans who had managed to flee over the Tanzanian border in the wake of the ‘Mutukula massacre’ in January 1972 (Martin 1974; Legum 1975). Human rights discourse began to be applied more directly to describe what was happening in 1974, when the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) published a damning report documenting a wide array of rights abuses committed in Uganda since 1971, including state sanctioned murder and torture. They had collaborated with Legum and Martin and were keen to emphasise the institutionally ingrained nature of the abuses being committed, in a bid not to be distracted by the larger-than-life character and unpredictable antics of Amin himself. State agencies, including the Military Police, the State Research Centre (SRC), and the Public Safety Unit (PSU) were named and shamed as some of the worst instigators of violence and torture (Ibid., 16-17).

The completed ICJ report included long lists of the dead and disappeared, and a scathing open letter from Wanume Kibedi, Uganda’s former Foreign Minister who had fled the country sometime prior (Ibid., 65). Kibedi’s letter was largely free of human rights terminology, bar fleeting references to ‘basic rights’, but highlights the beginning of more sustained collaboration and cross-pollination of ideas between Ugandan actors and outside organizations as they sought to counter the military regime. Recent scholarship has highlighted the need to treat this body of material with caution. As Leopold outlines, informants and information were not as readily available to those investigating rights abuses as they are today. Legum and Martin were both known to rely heavily on informants close to the ousted President, Milton Obote (Leopold 2020, 262). That former ministers of Amin’s government like Kibedi and, subsequently, Henry Kyemba (author of the widely disseminated expose ‘State of Blood’) came to dominate the popular narrative on Amin’s regime must be factored in to how the nature and scale of violence and rights abuses was recorded, and how blame was assigned (Kyemba 1977). Though they did important work in raising the alarm on events in Uganda, Martin and Legum’s own books on the matter readily replicated sensational rumours and stereotypes regarding Amin and his background and were heavily dependent on second-hand accounts of the regime in which myth and reality were invariably intertwined.

The ICJ report was particularly notable for the knock-on effect it had on domestic politics in Amin's Uganda. Stung by the criticisms levelled in the ICJ's findings, Amin announced that an internal inquiry into 'disappearances' of people in Uganda would be ordered with immediate effect. A Commission was established, with Justice Mohamed Said as its chair. State management and control of the investigations was quite blatant, with members of the SRC, itself an organization linked to atrocities, on the commission, including Captain Haruna Salim. Amin certainly regarded it as an opportunity for political theatre, to ease international and domestic criticism of his government. He had faced down a botched coup attempt in March 1974 from amongst his own soldiery and was already in a comparatively vulnerable position when the ICJ accusations landed. What followed was quite remarkable, as Ugandans across the country, a considerable number of them women, gave testimony of the killings and torture orchestrated by the army and security forces since Amin's takeover (Decker 2014, p.120). The commission spoke with witnesses in Lira, Kitgum, Mbarara, Gulu, and Fort Portal, covering a considerable spread of the country. The resulting testimonies painted a clear picture of the targeted violence within the military as the regime consolidated power, and the substantial abuses and excesses of state agents in the years that had followed. Senior regime figures, including Brigadier Hussein Marella (former head of the Military Police), and Ali Towilli (head of the PSU) were named in witness testimonies (Ibid.). The 'disappearances' inquiry was not itself framed overtly in human rights terms, but the bravery of a great many Ugandans in coming forwards, and their hope that the state and those that occupied it might be held to account for their actions was made apparent. The completed report was shelved, and its proposals ignored.

Further criticism and lobbying followed. Amnesty International (AI) picked up the case and began communicating behind the scenes with the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. (AI 1978, 2). Their own reports on human rights violations in Uganda followed later in 1978 (AI, 1978). The ICJ produced further materials in 1976, updating their existing record to include further sustained evidence of torture in the Public Safety Unit detention centre in Naguru, and they once again appealed to the UN Commission on Human Rights to investigate further. This report saw further collaboration with former Ugandan ministers now in exile, in this instance Edward Rugumayo, who had served as education minister between 1971 and 1973. Rugumayo's own account focused very much on the character and flaws of Amin himself, but also included some thoughtful consideration of the deeper colonial military history of the faction now ruling Uganda, and allusions to the encouragement and acceptance of their takeover by Britain in 1971. (ICJ 1976, 114). The murkier post-colonial and geopolitical dimensions of Amin's rise were not lost on Rugumayo, and it was precisely these elements which would continue to cause Britain discomfort and embarrassment in their ongoing dealings with the regime.

It has been argued that an important ingredient in the emergence of human rights as a transnational body was the frustration felt with the perceived inability of existing institutions and elites to entrench human rights ideas in international practice (Brier 2015). Burke has highlighted how the 1960s and 1970s saw authoritarian regimes in the developing world turn away from the

anti-colonial emphasis on rights that they had previously championed (Burke 2010). There is no greater evidence of the disconnect between the emerging 'community of conscience' and the formal procedures of the UN than Uganda's election to the United Nations commission on Human Rights in May 1976 (*Voice of Uganda*, 20 May 1976). It has been argued that Amin utilised his 1974 inquiry as a stalling mechanism, sending it to the UN to reduce pressure on his regime (Decker 2014, 132; 2013). Despite the ongoing scrutiny over rights abuses, the country was elected to the UN Commission. This followed Amin's election as chair of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1975, another episode that highlights the ways in which large scale international organizations were still prioritizing and upholding state sovereignty and legitimacy over individual liberties even as human rights began to 'breakthrough' on the international stage (Ibhawoh 175-177, 2017). This was precisely the backdrop to which the UN would find itself 'outflanked' by a dynamic transnational movement seeking to uphold and apply human rights ideas (Moyn 2010, 129). Similar frustrations can be detected in the anger of the emerging Ugandan human rights lobby, which condemned the OAU's refusal to respond to allegations levied against Amin. (FCO 31/2671, b).

By the late 1970s, the beginnings of a cross-pollination of rights discourses among Ugandan exile groups and resistance movements becomes apparent in the archive. This reflects the increasing attention being paid by the FCO to human rights concepts and groups. A press release by the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Uganda (PMLU) condemned murder and deprivation in Uganda, including a recent raid on Uganda's main University, Makerere, which had seen students assaulted and sexually abused by state forces (though the exact nature and scale of the violence was at this time being exaggerated due to a lack of concrete information) (FCO 31/2043, a). In a call for 'humanitarian intervention' a week or so later, the same organization condemned Amin explicitly in human rights terms, with numerous references to the 'value of human beings' and human rights more broadly. The PMLU appealed directly to the charter of the United Nations and insisted that in its current guise the Amin regime was no longer worthy of being treated as a functioning government, urging intervention. (FCO 31/2043, b).

In London, the Uganda Group for Human Rights (UGHR) was formed in February 1977. Headed up by Dr George Kanyeihamba, (a future member of Uganda's Supreme Court), and Ernest Mbaka, the organization was explicitly concerned 'with the aim of publicizing violations of human rights in Uganda and carrying out lobbying' (FCO 31/2671, c; FCO 31/2671, d). The UGHR wrote to foreign governments that still had intimate dealings with Amin condemning the regime, met with sympathetic MPs, and issued scathing letters to the FCO in Britain. Other offshoot resistance groups, which proliferated in the final years of Amin's rule, began to employ the language of human rights in their communications (FCO 31/2385, a). One British diplomat wryly noted that by the late 1970s new Ugandan opposition groups seemed to coalesce 'wherever one, two, or more Ugandan exiles are gathered together' (FCO 31/2043). A new front in the rapidly expanding world of transnational advocacy was opening, and the agency of African actors was playing a driving role. Contemporary writing on Ugandan human rights groups has demonstrated their struggle to find political space under the National Resistance Movement

(NRM) government, often opting to focus on localised and non-political issues and causes to avoid unwanted regime attention (Dicklitch and Lwanda 2003). What is striking about these early signs of rights agitation amongst Ugandans is that it has a much more extraverted and overtly political character, seeking to draw in support with which to oust Amin and wielding rights discourse to this end.

Talking the talk: the UK and Uganda, 1974–1979

As has been addressed in part two, UK-Uganda relations had soured in the early years of Amin's rule, despite Britain's own calculation that a maintenance of ties and cordial relations was in line with its own geopolitical interests. This deterioration was driven by the escalating violence, and unpredictability of the military government, but also by Amin's own frustrations at what he perceived (rightly) to be British reticence to offer him full support and the scale of military and financial backing that he and his supporters were seeking. The latter half of Amin's rule was defined by the complete breakdown of relations, culminating in an unprecedented suspension of the UK's diplomatic mission to Uganda in 1976. In the years that followed the UK began to 'talk the talk' on human rights in relation to Uganda and the Amin regime. There was condemnation of violence in explicit human rights terminology, a degree of collaboration and dialogue with transnational advocacy networks, and some attempts to bring sanctions against Amin through the European Community (EC) and UN. Such changes map to a broader shift in UK foreign policy as regards human rights that has been identified in other literature on the 1970s.

However, the specifics of the UK-Ugandan relationship must be considered before drawing too optimistic a conclusion about these changes. Amin's erratic and manipulative diplomacy had all but forced the UK into taking drastic diplomatic action against him, and human rights discourse offered an easy toolkit with which to recast a murky post-colonial situation with deep historical roots, in which the UK was very much embroiled, as a more straightforward moral evil. Even in taking on what was in many ways a pariah state sanctions were often hard to apply in practice, and the UK found itself toothless in its pursuit of meaningful action against Uganda. Human rights concepts served to reframe how the situation was being understood, but they did not prompt a substantial change in outcomes in Uganda itself. It was a regional political struggle between Amin and Julius Nyerere's Tanzania that proved decisive.

The UK broke off diplomatic relations with Uganda in July 1976. This was the first time it would break ties with any commonwealth country, and the first time in 30 years it had broken ties with any state. (Gitelson 1977, 372). The move followed a series of diplomatic spats in the years preceding it. There had been tit for tat expulsions of diplomats in 1974. (Ibid.) This was followed by an extraordinary episode in the summer of 1975 where Amin effectively coerced the then Foreign Secretary, James Callaghan, to visit Uganda to secure the life of a British author, Denis Hills, who was on trial for writing materials deemed critical of the president. The symbolism Amin inflicted upon those negotiating for Hill's release during this episode was particularly striking. Hills was held at an army base in Bombo, and the delegation sent from Britain to plead his case were compelled to meet there with Amin's 'Defence Council'

(Grahame 1980, 167). A small town, Bombo has deep historical links to the British imperial project in Uganda. It was where northern Ugandan and Sudanese recruits, the ancestors of the Ugandan Nubians, were first settled after their service in the colonial army (Johnson 2009, 118). A final diplomatic incident erupted in 1976 when Amin chose to involve Uganda in a hostage situation involving Palestinian hijackers and Israeli hostages, resolved when Israel stormed Entebbe Airport in the now infamous Operation Thunderbolt. In the aftermath of the raid a UK citizen, Dora Bloch, was murdered by Ugandan soldiers. This proved the final straw, and diplomatic ties were severed a few weeks later (Decker 2014, 138).

In the years that followed, the UK began to 'talk the talk' on human rights in Uganda. This should be understood as representative both of changes in UK foreign policy that were taking place on other fronts in the same time period, and of a gradual shift toward international recognition and condemnation of rights abuses in Uganda occurring globally. Other 'torture states' had come in for increased international ostracization since the emergence of a dictatorship in Greece in the late 1960s, and the watershed Chilean case in 1973 (Buchanan 2004, 182). This has been shown in the case of Greece to be a partial and often contradictory process, with human rights discourse filtering into the upper levels of diplomacy despite the ongoing dominance of other considerations at the decision-making level (Pedaliu 2016). In the US, awareness of Amin's regime had gathered steam through a familiar combination of individual accounts by outside witnesses to it, in this case the last American ambassador to Uganda Dr Thomas Melady, and the establishment of exile groups and NGOs seeking to raise awareness (Melady and Melady 1977). Coffee sanctions finally kicked in in the final years of Amin's time in power. Within Africa itself, Amin's regime had begun to draw criticism, most notably from Julius Nyerere, Tanzanian President, who refused to attend the OAU summit in Kampala in 1975 in protest.

Within the FCO, human rights reports on Uganda were circulated from 1974 onwards. Things escalated further when David Owen, who became Foreign Secretary in February 1977, oversaw a radical shift in the foregrounding of human rights as a stated pillar of Britain's foreign policy (Grealy 2020, 25). Owen pledged to 'give a higher priority than ever before to human rights' (Owen 1978, 14). This was evidently strategic as well as idealistic. Owen was genuinely enthusiastic about human rights concepts, publishing a book on the matter in 1978, but he was also conscious that states and institutions needed to harness and control rights discourse for themselves, and that they could be a useful weapon in the UK's post-imperial foreign policy (Eckel 2019, 196). Archival evidence from the mid 1970s onwards confirms an intensified interest in utilising human rights ideas in the FCO. Sympathetic MPs met with Ugandan Human Rights advocates (FCO 31/2671, c). Internal briefings increasingly took the line that 'human rights abuses' in Uganda were deplored and would be pushed back against (Ibid.). Owen oversaw the implementation of a 'human rights table' behind the scenes that documented and weighed up the comparative scale of rights abuses in states across the globe (FCO 58/1144, b). Uganda was regarded as among 'the most glaring offenders of all' (FCO 58/1144, a). Within the UN Commission on Human Rights the UK adopted what it termed a 'forward policy' on Uganda, seeking to push through a more substantial investigation into rights abuses (FCO 58/1176). The

language of human rights provided a powerful tool with which the UK could reframe a particularly embarrassing and difficult diplomatic relationship.

The archival record demonstrates that transnational advocacy networks were playing a direct role in influencing and supporting UK foreign policy as regards human rights questions in Uganda by the late 1970s, and that this support was increasing mutual. In a meeting held by the Secretary of State to discuss UK rights policy on the 25 May 1977, the consensus was that lobbying on Uganda should have started sooner, and that NGOs should continue to give 'discrete' assistance to their efforts (FCO 58/1144, b). There are also exchanges of letters between Amnesty International and the FCO in early 1977 in which both parties thank each other for their support (FCO 58/1174, b; *Ibid.*, c). In an internal memo in May 1977, Mr Luard instructed the FCO to 'give every possible support to the various voluntary bodies, such as Amnesty and the ICJ' (FCO 58/1144, b). At the level of discourse and norms it seems that the 'community of conscience' had found enthusiastic backers for their framing of the Ugandan situation within the FCO by the late 1970s, and that connections between the FCO and human rights NGOs were being developed further. Being a particularly bad case, and given that the UK had already severed diplomatic ties, Amin's Uganda was an easy testing ground for these ideas. Indeed, internal communications make it clear that there was a preference for focusing on the worst offenders whilst a more consistent rights policy was developed over time (*Ibid.*).

Despite the shift in rhetoric and approach, the implementation of human rights ideas by the UK in practice was a predictably messy, frustrated process. There were unsuccessful attempts to integrate a human rights clause into the renegotiated Lomé Convention (a trade agreement between the European Economic Community and a wide range of developing states), following a perceived failure of the EC to reduce aid flows to Uganda as news of rights abuses broke internationally (Grealy 2020, 124). In an internal memo W J Adams concluded that Uganda was nearly 'untouchable' under the existing treaty (FCO 58/1144, c). Some minor decreases in aid to Uganda were nonetheless achieved, but formal enshrinement of human rights clauses proved elusive (Rajana 1982, 193). There was also an episode of considerable embarrassment when it became known that Uganda Airlines flights from Stansted were still ferrying luxury contraband products to members of Amin's regime late into the 1970s, and the UK government was pushed belatedly by domestic protests into attempting, unsuccessfully, to prevent the shipping of such cargo into the country (Mamdani 1983, 81; Leopold 2020, 299.). Paul Otiti-Omule of the UGHR pulled no punches in a letter to the FCO when he declared the UK should have acted to stop flights 'two years ago' when it was first pointed out to them, and that 'one such shuttle means 50 Ugandan deaths.' (FCO 31/2671, e). Nonetheless, at the level of rhetoric and public pronouncement, the UK had shifted towards a much more enthusiastic engagement with human rights terminology by the late 1970s.

Alongside public statements and UN based efforts, there was a degree of background agitation and assistance by the UK to efforts to depose Amin's government. By far the most sensational example of this is the claim made by David Owen in the years since that he mooted the idea of having Amin assassinated, only to be rebuffed by the suggestion MI16 'would not contemplate arranging such a thing' (Owen 2006, 326). Owen frames his memory of Amin and his responses to him in human rights terms, but clearly considered state sponsored

assassination, demonstrating a more pragmatic and pseudo-utilitarian approach to the question. Numerous Ugandan rebel groups were denied support in their insurgent ambitions by the FCO on similar grounds (FCO 31/2043, d). More subtle, and more workable was the tacit support for Tanzania the UK provided in the conflict that removed Amin from power. Relations between Tanzania and Uganda had been fraught for some years, with Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere clashing with Amin on a wide range of issues, including a public refusal by the former to attend the OAU summit chaired by the latter in 1975 (Roberts 2014, 2). The continuing collapse of military discipline in the Uganda Army prompted a border war on the contested Kagera Salient in 1978, which drew Tanzania into full scale war with Uganda. Roberts has explored the UK's 'limited assistance' to Tanzania during this conflict, predicated on the belief that a change of regime in Uganda was a net positive, but that any assistance provided had to be discrete (Ibid.). The UK provided some degree of intelligence on the Ugandan forces to Tanzania and encouraged oil companies to maintain a low supply to hamstring Amin's forces. The war was won by a combination of the determination, organization and discipline of the Tanzanian forces, and the utter breakdown of a Ugandan military eroded by decades of declining functionality and years of damage inflicted upon it by Amin's erratic rule and use of the military as a source of patronage (Leopold 2020, 291).

Amin's defeat and flight into exile did not signal an end to conflict and suffering in Uganda. Considerable retaliatory violence was meted out in his home region of West Nile, and the fragile peace and attempts at electoral democracy that followed in 1980 quickly broke down after the controversial and disputed re-election of Milton Obote into a state of brutal civil war, culminating in the conquest of Uganda by Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) in 1986. Museveni's own 30-year government has faced plenty of external scrutiny over its conduct in recent years, both of its willingness to pursue electoral victory through heavy handed state interference, and the ongoing conduct of the Ugandan soldiery in its dealings with civilians. The relationship of outside powers and the state itself to human rights questions in Uganda has continued to be an ambiguous, multi-layered, and often contradictory one. It is not the purpose of this article to address the subsequent struggles inside and outside Uganda to champion human rights in the face of state led and insurgent violence, but it should certainly be noted that these struggles are very much ongoing.

Conclusion

The language of human rights is by its very nature abstract and ambiguous. It is open to many interpretations and uses, has many sub-dialects and 'vernaculars' and, with its focus on recategorizing short-term processes rather than analysing their distinct cultural contexts and long-term roots, it can sometimes obscure as much as it purports to reveal. The changing UK-Uganda relationship in the 1970s highlights this well. A longstanding, complex and interconnected relationship, established in the heyday of British imperial ambitions that brought into being a nation-state in the making, beset with political, institutional and socioeconomic challenges that owed a great deal to the external machinations of empire and their interaction with the pre-colonial developments of the 19th century, found itself suddenly and decisively reframed in the mid 1970s as a simple but emotive moral

question, a streamlined story of horrific wrongs committed by a 'mad' king, and what was to be done about him. The mid 1970s 'breakthrough' of human rights played a shaping role here, and this was a pivotal moment for the emergence of a newly energised 'community of conscience' of NGOs and individuals who genuinely and enthusiastically sought to bring about changes in the protections of individuals from their governments. This ascendant transnational advocacy network responded to and documented the atrocities being committed by Amin's regime in Uganda and succeeded not only in drawing international attention to what was happening through an explicitly human rights-oriented lens, but in pushing Amin's military government into evasive internal manoeuvres of its own. That this community also fostered the emergence of a constellation of Ugandan human rights groups among exiled communities in the west in the same period is particularly interesting, and merits further exploration. However, they were not exempt from the enormous gaps in information, post-colonial stereotypes and myth-making, and subtle factional biases that has always shaped external coverage of Amin's Uganda, and their reports must be treated with more caution now than they often were at the time.

A post-colonial reimagining of the UK-Uganda relationship was also made possible in this period by the hasty retreat into the past of European empires that had themselves maintained power by force and had established and reified the very coercive instruments and cultures that had subsequently seized power in Uganda. The UK had started to minimise its relationship with Amin in the early 1970s after a brief honeymoon period but began to play a leading role in criticizing Uganda in human rights terms from the mid-1970s onwards. Amin himself perceived this realignment and reframing as an abandonment, retaliating accordingly, and his agency should not be downplayed in the rapid deterioration of diplomatic relations, and the rise of a human rights focused account of his regime that followed. In his own efforts to hold staged inquiries, to stake a claim within the UN and OAU, and to manipulate the international scene to his own advantage Amin demonstrates the persistent role of state power in seeking to capture and control rights discourse for itself. Whilst human rights discourse (and condemnation of Uganda in these terms) went mainstream and found itself adopted readily by an enthusiastic foreign secretary in David Owen, pursuit of meaningful sanctions and pushback against Uganda often foundered on pragmatic considerations and institutional constraints. For all the external noise generated as the UK began to 'talk the talk' on human rights, Amin's fall was, in the end, an African affair, precipitated by the same deterioration of Uganda's coercive institutions that had enabled him to seize power in the first place, and the earnest commitment of Nyerere's Tanzania to Amin's downfall.

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