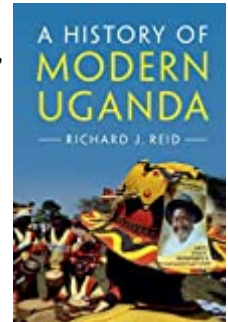


Richard J. Reid. *A History of Modern Uganda.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 426 pp. \$27.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-67112-6.



Reviewed by Martha Lagace (Boston University)

Published on H-Africa (January, 2021)

Commissioned by David D. Hurlbut (Independent Scholar)

Not often do scholars dare anymore to synthesize the past of a single nation, but *A History of Modern Uganda* may change that. This lively synthesis shows the value of a comparative approach within one country; the last such history of Uganda, for example, was published more than thirty years ago. *A History of Modern Uganda* serves to counteract the trend of balkanization in Africanist scholarship, in which, partly for reasons of academic funding and professionalization, scholars stake out particular places, timeframes, and themes even within the same country. Richard J. Reid, a history professor at SOAS, offers a way to tackle the problem and shows why it is worth trying. The result is a layered approach that builds together points on migration, power, and inequality while hewing to his overall (and enduring) concerns with cultural memory, violence, and militarism.

Scholars of other regions will find the themes and approach thoughtful regardless of Uganda's particularities. One recurring argument, for example, is about claustrophobia, the social tension

that spikes when opportunities for migration in search of safety or opportunity are too controlled, as during colonialism but also currently. The author's term "political claustrophobia," for example, helps for understanding recurrent struggles. "It should come as little surprise that enclosure brought about heightened levels of violence in postcolonial Uganda.... A political culture built around the notion that 'winner takes all' quickly developed within the confined space that was the nation-state, and panic—manifest in extraordinary brutality towards, and between, citizens—became part of that political culture" (p. 8). Although the book was written before Uganda's 2016 general election, its warnings about political claustrophobia still hold up. (As of this writing, Ugandans are experiencing another perilous election season in which, on January 14, 2021, voters will elect the president and Parliament. Yoweri Museveni has been president since 1986, and two generations of young people have known no other.)

Five chapters, roughly chronological and covering the last two hundred years or so, discuss turning points, repetitions, and distinctive actors. Despite a wide diversity of sources, the narrative style makes for smooth reading. Sources include informal interviews in Uganda between 2010 and 2015; historical and anthropological scholarship; “gray literature”; and archives in London, Rome, and four sites in Uganda, including the National Archives. One gains the sense from the energetic writing that everyday conversations with Ugandans were most valuable for understanding both Ugandans’ desire for and ambivalence about facing the past.

For this is often a violent past. Official neglect and avoidance of history—its “mayhem and blood” (p. 346)—remind of neighboring Rwanda, a point raised in a recent ethnography by anthropologist Laura Eramian titled *Peaceful Selves: Personhood, Nationhood, and the Post-conflict Moment in Rwanda* (2018). Reid presents the paradox that even as history is frequently evoked and many ordinary people do grapple with it as best they can, officials degrade it at the national level. This is partly for mythmaking, to make it seem that the current regime has created a new order—Reid sees many similarities to the past, including the sixteenth century—and partly to promote technocratic development as in Rwanda. This means that the Uganda Museum is barely funded, a point in Reid’s preface, and students and teachers are trained to devalue history as a living set of experiences open to analysis. This stance toward the past means that the country pays a price. “The neglect of, indeed hostility towards, history in secondary and tertiary education means that historical consciousness resides not in the nation but in those ethnic and religious communities where it is susceptible to angry mobilisation and demagoguery” (p. 350).

Given these conditions, I would have liked to hear from Reid how as a historian he would suggest that a country face its history. Is the answer to

find innovative sponsors for the Uganda Museum, develop TV dramas, have something like South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (if not under the current president then afterward), or try something different? It seems that historians can take the next step.

One related theme about authority that Reid returns to often is religion as a counterweight to political oppression and a source of power and politics in its own right. This is particularly interesting considering the “religious tourism” that Uganda seems to attract nowadays from ordinary foreigners, in addition to the long interest of established churches (p. 335). In *A History of Modern Uganda* readers learn, for example, about rural rebellions under the banner of Nyabingi, a female deity going back two hundred years in the rugged borderland of southern Uganda and northern Rwanda. The deity served as a force for unity as well as rebellion against militaristic outsiders attempting to dominate the people. How and why her inspiration was eventually quelled in the 1930s, or what forms remain, would be fascinating to know. Using the layered approach that structures the book, Reid has sections that concentrate on such diverse histories of religious power. A reader can appreciate the benefits of these concentrated “call outs” in short form but also can wonder to what extent the results might be more integrated, since (as the author recognizes) religious faith and politics, and their gendered components, are important in all spheres of Uganda life today. In this light, a future edition or future history might draw attention to the alternative sources of religious power invested in certain former occupations—iron working and potting, for example—and see if or how they emerge in certain transformative occupations today. One could also better grasp in this book the intriguing biography about a Balochistani trader who in the 1800s found his way to the highest circles of power, if one notices that one of his popular products for sale was mirrors. Elsewhere on the continent people have used mirrors and other shiny objects for their mysterious power

function, both on Congo power figures (*nkisi*) and, as anthropologist Mariane Ferme has written of war-torn Sierra Leone in *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone* (2001), as aids for making sense of confusing or difficult circumstances not unrelated to a violent past. As with the deity Nyabingi, one might assume that alternative sources of power do not disappear but take other forms.

In a future edition, it would be good to add more maps (perhaps interspersed in the text) to help separate some page-long paragraphs and make the visual style more reader-friendly. A future edition could also dive more into topics like the recurrence of famine (now with global warming), the reification of agriculture alongside the dangerous phenomenon of land grabs, and generational transfer and the plight of youth in a very young nation and region. Readers do not need to be Ugandans or scholars of the country to find this synthesis fascinating and thought provoking for the questions it raises about change and continuity in Africa and elsewhere.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

Citation: Martha Lagace. Review of Reid, Richard J. *A History of Modern Uganda*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. January, 2021.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55348>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.