

NEW AFRICAN HISTORIES

CARCERAL AFTERLIVES

Prisons, Detention, and Punishment
in Postcolonial Uganda



KATHERINE BRUCE-LOCKHART

Carceral Afterlives

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in Postcolonial Uganda*



Katherine Bruce-Lockhart

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For my three biggest supporters,
Joanne, Simon, and Jordan

Imprisonment politicizes everyone. Arbitrary arrests and imprisonment without trial provide a new pattern and insight for him [the detainee] into the true nature and the insecurities of the governments that use it.

—Rajat Neogy, “Topics: How It Feels to Be a Political Prisoner,”
New York Times, October 25, 1969, 32

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Abbreviations

ASCC	Archives and Special Collections, Carleton University
BKMKP	Benedicto K. M. Kiwanuka Papers
BOA	British Online Archives
CASP	Cadet Assistant Superintendent of Prisons
CDWA	Colonial Development and Welfare Act
CID	Criminal Investigations Department
CIVHR	Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights
CPSA	Central Police Station Archives
DP	Democratic Party
GDA	Gulu District Archives
HDA	Hoima District Archives
IBEAC	Imperial British East Africa Company
ICJ	International Commission of Jurists
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPC	Indian Penal Code
JDA	Jinja District Archives
KAR	King's African Rifles
KDA	Kabale District Archives
KRDA	Kabarole District Archives
MDA	Mbale District Archives

MODA	Moroto District Archives
MRC	Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick
MUAC	Makerere University Africana Collection
NRA	National Resistance Army
NRM	National Resistance Movement
OC	Officer in Charge (Uganda Prisons Service)
PATSL	Prisons Academy and Training School Library
PSU	Public Safety Unit
RCA	Rubaga Cathedral Archives
RCS	Royal Commonwealth Society, University of Cambridge
SRB	State Research Bureau
TPDF	Tanzanian People's Defence Force
UKNA	United Kingdom National Archives
UN	United Nations
UNA	Uganda National Archives
UNAL	Uganda National Archives Library
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNLA	Uganda National Liberation Army
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSDRI	United Nations Social Defense Research Institute
UPC	Uganda People's Congress
UPL	Uganda Parliamentary Library
UPS	Uganda Prisons Service
UPSRC	Uganda Prisons Service Record Centre



Uganda, 1980. Map by Brian Edward Balsley, GISP.

Introduction

Captivity and Freedom in Postcolonial Uganda

ON THE evening of October 8, 1962, thousands of people lined the streets of Kampala, eagerly awaiting the declaration of Uganda's independence. When midnight arrived, crowds watched intently as the Union Jack was taken down and Uganda's flag, with its red, yellow, and black stripes, was raised against a backdrop of fireworks. One foreign correspondent described the "unprecedented scenes of rejoicing" in the new capital city, as dancing, singing, and cheering crowds filled the streets throughout the night.¹ In the lead-up to these celebrations, the government announced that between 2,500 and 3,500 prisoners would be released, and also indicated that many more would be granted remission.² Along with female prisoners serving short sentences, Uganda's new leaders prioritized those who had been incarcerated for "offences arising from political affairs," thus including individuals imprisoned for anticolonial struggles.³ Their freedom was highly symbolic, meant to represent both a rupture from colonial rule and a new future for the Ugandan nation.

To mark the occasion, Milton Obote—Uganda's new prime minister—delivered a speech. Calling the release an "act of grace," he urged the ex-prisoners to be good citizens. "I very much hope that this generosity on the part of the new Government will encourage prisoners when released to be of good behaviour," he exclaimed, "and to help the Government and the people of the new Uganda. When prisoners are released they should work hard

to assist in the maintenance of law and order, without which our country will not go forward.”⁴ Obote thus not only celebrated the prisoners’ release but also reminded them—and the nation—of the limits of this freedom.

Such limits were immediately experienced by the prisoners excluded from the Independence Day amnesty and remission. Uganda’s prison population had climbed steadily throughout the post-World War II years, and by 1960 it had reached its peak, with over nineteen thousand held in the Uganda Prisons Service (UPS).⁵ Many more were confined in Uganda’s two other prison systems: while UPS was run by the central government, there were also prisons run by Buganda Kingdom—the most powerful polity prior to colonization—and by various local government authorities. The release of several thousand prisoners at independence thus only affected a small percentage of Uganda’s incarcerated population. Among those excluded from the Independence Day clemency measures were prisoners labeled as “habitual criminals” and those arrested in connection with the Rwenzururu secessionist movement in western Uganda.⁶ In the state’s view, the latter were too political, as the movement threatened Uganda’s newfound national identity, while the former were not political enough, as those classified as “criminals” were not seen as valuable and productive members of the new nation.

Many Ugandans, however, challenged these lines of exclusion. Some people in prison wrote letters, drawing on a tactic long used as a form of protest by those behind bars. One such letter came from Mukama, a convicted prisoner held at Bufulubi local government prison who had been originally charged with stealing a bicycle.⁷ “Since we now have one Government in Uganda,” he wrote to senior local government officials, “and we got independence so as to chase foreigners, why should there be [a] difference yet there is one Government? And why were our friends, who were imprisoned by the Uganda Government prisons, granted remission yet we were not?”⁸ Mukama therefore challenged what he saw as the remnants of the colonial indirect rule structure in Uganda’s penal system, using the language of unity that government officials themselves celebrated at this time. Officials dismissed his complaint, indicating that he was a “habitual criminal” and a “troublemaker,” especially as he had repeatedly deployed another key tool of prisoners’ resistance: escape.⁹ Mukama had broken out of prison four times, directly challenging the state’s carceral capacity by taking freedom into his own hands.

Prisons also became sites of dissent in more public ways. In November 1962, just a month after independence, approximately one thousand members of the Rwenzururu secessionist movement attacked a local government prison in Toro. As they overtook the prison, they freed forty individuals and

“badly damaged” the building in the process.¹⁰ Members of the movement thus drew on a tactic that has been widely used in struggles against state repression, from the storming of the Bastille in revolutionary France to the attacks on prisons in colonial India during the uprising of 1857–58.¹¹ As historian Dan Berger writes, prisons have long been targeted in anti-oppressive struggles, as they “stand in for bigger structures of violence,” while those in prison become a “symbol whose freedom marks a step toward larger, collective liberation.”¹² By releasing their incarcerated comrades, the Rwenzururu secessionists sent a powerful message to the government, demonstrating that they too would exercise agency over their freedom.

The Independence Day clemency measures and Ugandans’ response to them reveal a great deal about the connection between freedom and captivity in postcolonial Uganda. Through enacting the release and remission, the state sought to publicly align itself with freedom, the watchword and goal of anticolonial movements across the Global South in this period. The release of political prisoners was especially poignant, as many of Africa’s new generation of leaders had been held in colonial carceral sites, from Kwame Nkrumah—who, following his release from James Fort Prison, went on to become the president of Ghana—to Jomo Kenyatta, who was held in the brutal detention camp system set up as part of British counterinsurgency efforts against the Kenya Land and Freedom Army.¹³ Yet, while the Independence Day measures represented a public performance of freedom, the contours and meanings of this freedom were a site of contestation between the Ugandan state and its citizens. Carceral spaces were key arenas in which this struggle unfolded, one in which freedom was denied, debated, and demanded.

This book is about incarceration in postcolonial Uganda and the spaces, ideas, politics, and experiences associated with punitive confinement. It examines the two and a half decades following independence, covering the period between 1962 and the inauguration of Uganda’s current president, Yoweri Museveni, in 1986. In this twenty-four-year period, Ugandans experienced seven governments—most of which were overthrown by force—as well as the mass expulsion of Uganda’s South Asian population, a war with Tanzania, and a civil war. Each government—particularly the Obote I (1966–71), Amin (1971–79), and Obote II (1980–85) regimes—relied heavily on incarceration to maintain its power, with devastating consequences for Ugandans. As a work of both social and political history, this book also examines how carceral systems were imagined and experienced by those held within, working for, or impacted by them. It traces the lives and stories of people held within penal spaces, both those categorized as “political” and

“criminal” prisoners; prison staff; other security agents; government officials; family members of those affected by incarceration; and the Ugandan public. As Ann Laura Stoler argues, scholars should not simply examine “what is ‘left’” following colonialism but also “what people are ‘left *with*’” and how they deal with the “durability of what is not easily disposable or set aside.”¹⁴

Carceral Afterlives argues that confinement—both as a punishment in and of itself and as a vehicle for other modes of punishment—was central to state power and critiques of the state in postcolonial Uganda. This was the case across all the regimes in this period, from those considered to be civilian governments to Idi Amin’s military dictatorship. Confinement occurred in a range of spaces, such as government-run prisons inherited from colonial rule and informal detention sites in which the state tortured and killed perceived enemies. Throughout these decades, Ugandans contested the government’s use of incarceration and, in the process, made powerful critiques about the limits of freedom in the postcolonial state.

This argument has four wider implications for the study of Uganda’s history, the postcolonial state, and global histories of prisons and confinement. First, it challenges the idea that Amin’s military dictatorship was uniquely brutal. Called “Hitler in Africa” and “The Butcher of Africa,” Amin has long been viewed as the African continent’s ultimate example of a violent dictator. Spaces of confinement have played a key role in cementing his reputation, with headlines such as “Amin ‘Joined In’ Prison Killings” and “I Was in Idi Amin’s Death Camp” relaying tales of his regime’s brutality around the world. The Amin years were, without question, a time of horrific violence, torture, and state-sponsored killings, but the regime’s punitive practices borrowed heavily from Obote, who in turn adapted many colonial policies. By adopting a more holistic approach to the study of postcolonial confinement, this book demonstrates the recursive nature of incarceration and punishment in Uganda’s history, thereby situating the Amin regime’s repression within a longer history of state violence that is tied to British colonial rule.

Second, *Carceral Afterlives* emphasizes the coloniality of Uganda’s system of confinement.¹⁵ As was the case across much of the African continent, confinement as a form of punishment was a largely alien concept in the territory now known as Uganda prior to British rule. Prisons were imposed very early on in the colonial period. While justified as part of the “civilizing mission,” they played a key part in the violent imposition and maintenance of colonial control. Despite their status as a hated symbol of colonial repression, prisons persisted after independence—a phenomenon that can be found across most former colonial states yet has largely been taken for granted in existing scholarship. This book instead unpacks the prison’s

postcolonial endurance, examining how government officials sought to harness the symbolic, material, and coercive power of prisons to serve a range of political agendas. In doing so, it also engages in wider debates about the influence of colonial legacies in independent Africa, long a preoccupation of postcolonial scholarship. The prison's continued existence across former colonial states is one of the key examples of how colonial structures and ideologies are not "bounded by the formal legalities of imperial sovereignty over persons, places and things."¹⁶ Uganda's leaders strategically drew upon multiple aspects of colonial punishment to boost their power, while also borrowing methods from their predecessors, other postcolonial counterparts elsewhere on the continent, and wider global penal trends. In examining these, this book moves away from sweeping and static accounts of colonial legacies, instead arguing for empirically rooted studies that work across multiple scales of analysis.¹⁷

Third, this book argues that scholars must pay closer attention to the connections between carceral systems in the Global South and Global North. While penal institutions in Africa have, both historically and presently, been used to reinforce racist ideas about the "barbarism" and "backwardness" of the continent, *Carceral Afterlives* shows how prisons and other sites of punitive confinement are products of "modern" power. This is not the so-called progressive and imagined "modernity" used by colonial officials to justify their presence in Africa and elsewhere, but rather the modern power created through systems of colonialism, capitalism, captivity, and white supremacy. While the history of punishment has unfolded differently across geographical spaces, the wider context of carceral systems' colonial origins and entanglement in other systems of oppression must be kept in view. With this approach, one can begin to see the similarities across penal systems in the Global North and the Global South, including their role in economic exploitation, the intransigent commitment to reforms despite widespread evidence that prisons do not create safer societies, and the ongoing centrality of violence to penal practices. This book thus challenges the teleological narratives that have been so entrenched in studies of punishment and used to create hierarchies of "civilization," instead foregrounding the shared features of penal systems across the globe.

Finally, *Carceral Afterlives* shows how prisons and other sites of punitive confinement have been important arenas of resistance and critique in postcolonial Uganda. Incarcerated people and those in solidarity with them on the outside have long used the prison and other spaces of captivity as symbols of unfreedom and sites of struggle. This has been closely studied in the context of other liberation struggles on the African continent, from

the resistance of detainees in Kenya during the 1950s to Nelson Mandela's "long walk to freedom" in apartheid South Africa.¹⁸ There has also been much written about the prison and anticolonial resistance in other parts of the Global South, such as the "gaol-going" strategies used by the Indian National Congress and communist visions forged in the prisons of colonial Vietnam.¹⁹ Finally, struggles for freedom have been closely examined in the United States, from the contributions of Black prison activists to wider civil rights and Black Power movements in the post–World War II period to the ongoing movements for prison abolition led by Black scholar-activists such as Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore.²⁰ What has received much less attention, however, is how such struggles have played out in the postcolonial African context. In Uganda, the state's use of incarceration and detention without trial was constantly contested by Ugandans inside and outside of penal spaces. Politicians, lawyers, those behind bars, and members of the public used critiques of confinement to express disillusionment with the limits of decolonization and hold the state accountable. This book thus traces the significant contributions that Ugandans have made to the interconnected struggles against captivity, colonialism, and neocolonialism.

GLOBAL HISTORIES OF THE PRISON

As a technology of empire, the prison spread throughout the globe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, becoming a nearly universal institution. Its history, therefore, cannot only be told within national or regional frames of reference. While *Carceral Afterlives* focuses on prisons and other spaces of punitive confinement in Uganda, it does so in a way that attends to the wider global transfers of ideas, institutions, and people across the colonial and postcolonial periods. Prisons were first established in Uganda in the 1890s, approximately a century after what historians have called the "birth" of the prison in western Europe and the United States.²¹ By then, incarceration was the central mechanism of punishment across of the world, with prisons and penitentiaries—including Pentonville in England, Auburn in the United States, and the Casa de Correção in Brazil—becoming a symbol of the "modern" state and its desire to create "docile and useful" citizens.²²

While Uganda's prison system has not been closely studied, there has been a great deal written about the history of prisons across Africa and the Global South.²³ Scholars have examined the parameters of colonial penal institutions in multiple regions, demonstrating how they were rooted in racism, violence, and forced labor. One of the main questions within this field is the extent to which colonial prisons and their successors reflected European models. In response, historians have drawn heavily upon Michel

Foucault's seminal work *Discipline and Punish*, whether to argue for the absence of a "carceral archipelago" in the colonial context or to challenge his dichotomy of premodern and modern power.²⁴ While Foucault's work brings into focus the expansive nature of carcerality, it should not be used as a rigid template for assessing prison systems in the colonial or postcolonial context, particularly as he does not take race into account.²⁵ Shifting away from state discourse and grand theories, some of the most generative work on African prisons has focused on the lived experiences of confinement, highlighting the communities forged while behind bars in sites such as Robben Island and detention camps in Kenya.²⁶ Prisoners' writing, especially through memoirs, has further illuminated such stories and social worlds, playing a key role in shaping public understandings of both colonial and postcolonial confinement.²⁷ Finally, scholars have looked at the recent application of human rights policies and reforms in prisons, as well as ethnographic accounts of everyday prison life.²⁸

What has been largely absent, therefore, are inquiries into the decades following independence, the time in which prisons transitioned from colonial to national institutions. This continuity is not only overlooked in the African context but also more globally. Whereas scholars have closely studied the prison's "birth" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, its imperial expansion, and its explosion in the United States beginning in the 1970s, the prison's entrenchment after colonialism has not been closely analyzed. Understanding why and how this occurred is crucial to making sense of where we are today, as more people—upwards of eleven million in 2020—are incarcerated than at any time in human history.²⁹

Until recently, scholarly analysis of postcolonial penal systems on the African continent either appeared as an addendum to histories of colonial punishment or to emphasize the violence of postcolonial states. Achille Mbembe, for example, characterizes the goals of colonial punishment as "disciplining bodies with the aim of making better use of them, docility and productivity going hand in hand," while arguing that punishment in the postcolonial setting was marked by "raw violence" and a "loss of limits or sense of proportion."³⁰ Although Florence Bernault provides more depth, tracing some of the specific legacies of colonial penal systems, she adopts a similar tone, arguing that "post-colonial dictators have built sites of detention and torture that speak to no other logic than that of megalomaniacal and murderous power."³¹ While reflective of certain aspects of postcolonial punishment, such representations remain affixed to the wider tropes used to frame African states in negative terms rather than drawing upon empirical evidence. This approach runs the risk of furthering the idea that

postcolonial governance can be summarized in “single stories” and stereotypes.³² In contrast, this book argues that carceral systems in postcolonial Africa need to be analyzed with the same level of nuance and specificity that has been applied to studies of these same systems in the colonial period and in the Global North.

The best scholarship on postcolonial prisons has done exactly this. At the core of these inquiries has been the question of how to approach the nature of the colonial legacy. There is, unsurprisingly, widespread agreement that the prison’s persistence is a key indicator of the impact of colonialism on penal systems after independence. As Mairi MacDonald writes, the “idea that social transgression could and should be punished by incarceration” was a product of colonialism, as prisons were largely alien across the continent prior to European rule.³³ She is cautious, however, about ascribing all aspects of postcolonial punishment to European influence, instead arguing that scholars should consider what African leaders “needed” of the colonial legacy to “legitimize” their states and power, particularly in the context of a changing global political landscape that included the Cold War.³⁴ Others have adopted a similar approach. Christine Deslaurier, for example, argues that although the prison’s colonial origins in Burundi have “left tangible traces on its current architecture, norms, and organization,” the postcolonial state “has also adjusted the prison over time to its own social and political designs.”³⁵ Benedicto Machava’s work demonstrates how Mozambique’s carceral system was shaped by colonial precedents such as the use of flogging, imprisonment, and punishment through labor but was also impacted by state-socialist policies, influences from other countries in the Global South such as China, and the realities of austerity.³⁶ These and other case studies point to both the centrality of colonialism and the influence of other national and global dynamics in shaping penal systems after independence.

This book argues that the prison is a central part of colonialism’s afterlife in Uganda.³⁷ Chapter 1 outlines the features of colonial punishment, providing a foundation for subsequent analysis of Uganda’s postcolonial carceral system. Along with the striking continuities within the Uganda Prisons Service—in which buildings, uniforms, and policies remained largely unchanged in the postcolonial period—there were many other aspects of punishment that were shaped by colonial approaches. These include the use of detention without trial, deployment of the military against civilians, repeated and prolonged enactments of states of emergency, and the use of camps for punishment and surveillance in the context of wartime. Furthermore, the colonial-era criminalization of “vagrancy,” “idleness,” sex work,

and the LGBTQ2S+ community has led to many Ugandans being put behind bars, convicted of offenses created to serve colonial power structures.

Such continuities, while impacted by colonialism, also reflect broader realities of penal systems worldwide. The study of the prison's postcolonial endurance is animated by a bigger question that runs throughout the history of this institution: Why do governments continue to use prisons, despite significant evidence that they are violent and racist spaces that do not make societies safer? As Frank Dikötter argues, it is “precisely the singular resilience of this contested institution that makes a history of the prison so urgent.”³⁸ In Uganda, while the very existence of the prison was attributable to colonialism, it endured for many of the same reasons it continued to exist elsewhere in the world: it allowed governments to enhance their control through confining those deemed “dissident” and “deviant.” As the British did during the colonial period—and many states around the world do today—the postcolonial Ugandan state used the prison to enforce hierarchies that served its interests, imprisoning those whose politics, ethnicity, race, religion, sexuality, economic activities, and even choice of clothing were deemed subversive. The definitions of deviancy shifted across regimes, but the centrality of confinement as a tool of state violence and power did not.

This coercive function, however, does not fully explain the prison's persistence. Practically, prisons endured for some of the same reasons that many other colonial-era systems did. Postcolonial governments recognized that the institutional infrastructure of colonialism could be useful in managing and controlling newly created national communities, many of which were grappling with divisions created or exacerbated during colonial rule. Prisons were also symbolically powerful. Uganda's leaders sought to harness the prison's imaginative capital, carefully cultivating its image as a “monument to modernity” that could enhance their reputation globally.³⁹ This phenomenon can be seen across time and space in the Global South: from nineteenth-century South American nations to twentieth-century African ones, postcolonial governments strategically used the prison to buttress their claims to “modern” statehood in pursuit of national and global legitimacy.⁴⁰ Finally, prisons provided the state with a source of free labor. In Uganda and elsewhere on the continent, prisoners were forced to work on farms and in factories. Uganda's leaders extolled the prisoners' ability to produce for the nation, with this messaging becoming an important part of their economic development strategies following centuries of European exploitation. Although many other African nations had similar goals and facilities, this entanglement of carcerality and capitalism has not been as closely studied in the African context as it has in the Global North. This

economic aspect—as well as the prison’s symbolic dimensions—is analyzed in chapter 2. Together, the chapters in this book show how the prison’s endurance in Uganda must be read in the context of national, regional, and global political dynamics; Uganda’s colonial history; and the wider history of this institution’s centrality to the power of the “modern” state.

BEYOND THE PRISON: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PUNISHMENT

In the 1960s and 1970s, as the entrenchment of prisons became a reality in many newly independent states on the African continent, another chapter in global history of punishment was beginning: the unprecedented expansion of carceral power in the United States. As historian Heather Thompson has shown, while the number of people incarcerated in both federal and state prisons increased by 52,249 between 1935 and 1970, it grew by a staggering 1.2 million between 1970 and 2005.⁴¹ Today, the United States has over 20 percent of the world’s prisoners—a disproportionate number of whom are Black, Brown, and Indigenous—yet approximately 5 percent of the world’s population.⁴² Mass incarceration has impacted every facet of American life, from the workings of democracy to the revitalization of rural communities reeling from the economic fallout of neoliberalism.⁴³ Beyond the prison, immigration detention, parole, policing, and other forms of confinement and surveillance have also expanded their scope and power, turning the USA into what scholars have called a “carceral state.”⁴⁴

The United States is, in many ways, an exceptional case when it comes to histories of captivity, and it has been largely treated as such by both its own historians and those studying penal systems elsewhere. There is much to be gained, however, by adopting a more comparative approach and considering the connections across the United States, other settler colonial states such as Canada, and former colonial states in the Global South.⁴⁵ This comparative approach reveals some differences, but also many overwhelming similarities. Such connections should not come as a surprise, as the prison and the wider penal systems that they function within were exports of empire, shaped by the same set of ideas about punishment and “civilization” from the late eighteenth century onwards.

One of the main features of the “carceral state” scholarship has been its “institutionally capacious” approach to punishment, which analyzes the “full range of policies and agencies that employ penal power” rather than just focusing on prisons or other easily recognizable penal institutions.⁴⁶ This is very useful in the Ugandan context, as informal detention sites—which are discussed in chapters 5 and 6—were a fundamental part of the state’s carceral infrastructure, particularly during the Amin and Obote II regimes. Captivity at

the hands of the state extended far beyond the prison: one could be confined in the trunk of a car, the basement of a building, a police cell, within military barracks, or in a hotel room or private residence. Bringing these spaces into view not only reveals the complexity and capacity of Uganda's carceral system but also allows for further insights into how different sites of confinement related to each other in ways that reinforced the state's power.

This is especially clear when we consider the dynamic between prisons and detention sites. Prisons, on the one hand, were spaces of expectation. This had deep roots: the colonial state deliberately framed UPS as a rule-bound institution where proportionality and professionalism supposedly prevailed, a framing that emerged in the context of the discourse of "civilization" used to justify the imposition of prisons. Similar expectations continued after independence, becoming linked to visions of national unity, productivity, and "modernity." The prison system—whether in the colonial or postcolonial context—never lived up to this set of expectations, but its existence had important effects. Firstly, it had a significant impact on the institutional culture of UPS and the professional identities of prison staff, which are explored in chapter 2 and chapter 3. Secondly, it created a framework for accountability. When such expectations were violated, Ugandans critiqued and challenged the state's uses of incarceration, including through the courts, engagement with local government officials, the media, and through political organizing. The state rarely held up its end of the bargain, but, as is examined in the final three chapters of this book, Ugandans pushed them to do otherwise.

Detention sites, in contrast, were spaces of "exception."⁴⁷ They were untethered from the legal system and run by paramilitary groups that were independent of the police and prison services. Detention took place in long-standing sites of coercion, such as police stations and military barracks, as well as less obvious spaces, such as private buildings and hotel rooms. Many, such as Nakasero State Research Centre and Makindye Military Prison, were known to the public but were also spaces of secrecy and silences. Most people held in these sites did not make it out alive, and those who did carried the trauma of torture and bearing witness to extreme violence. Accounts of these detention sites have dominated portrayals of postcolonial confinement in Uganda, especially during Amin's military rule. In an article in the *Washington Post* published shortly after Amin's overthrow, journalists Martha Honey and Tony Avirgan offered a lurid—but not untypical—description of Nakasero: "As we entered the dungeons today, we saw scenes of incredible horror—bodies in varying states of decay and mutilation, almost all showing signs of torture. There were pools of blood on the steps, and blood was

smeared on the walls.” Some of the detainees, they claimed, had “survived by eating human flesh.”⁴⁸ For some readers of this *Washington Post* article, Honey and Avirgan’s account no doubt confirmed long-standing racist notions of “darkest” Africa, whose spaces of confinement were often viewed as similar to medieval “dungeons.”⁴⁹

These detention sites, which were incredibly violent, should not be read as markers of postcolonial dysfunction nor reversion to an “archaic” penal past but rather as fundamental components of “modern” punishment.⁵⁰ Scholars such as Giorgio Agamben have argued that such “spaces of exception,” from Nazi concentration camps to Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, are a fundamental part of state power in both the Global North and Global South.⁵¹ This insight connects to a critique long made by scholars studying colonial punishment, who challenge Foucault’s argument that the “birth” of the prison marked a rupture from public and physically violent forms of punishment to custodial, disciplinary forms that acted on the “soul.” As historian Diana Paton writes in her work on Jamaica, “The idea that modern forms of power are abstracted from—indeed, counterposed to—pain and violence is false and is itself a product of the Enlightenment narrative. . . . Violence and pain are fully part of modern power.”⁵²

With this recognition, a new analytic space opens for examining Uganda’s carceral system. While seemingly on different ends of a carceral continuum, prisons and detention sites were closely connected. Practically, they overlapped in terms of prisoners and personnel, as people frequently circulated between these spaces. At a deeper level, their simultaneous existence speaks to the multiple ways in which the state sought to perform and reproduce its power, from the disciplinary discourses, industrial and agricultural projects, and nation-building agendas associated with the prison to the use of detention sites, disappearance, and extrajudicial killings to remove those deemed a threat to the body politic. These different modes of carceral power should not be read through the binary lens of “modern” / “premodern” but rather in relation to widespread trends in penal practice and state power across time and space.

DISSENT, DECOLONIZATION, AND ABOLITION ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

On the night of December 30, 1977, Kenyan writer and scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o was arrested by members of the Special Branch at his home in Nairobi. He spent nearly a year in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, the same site that had, only two decades before, held many women imprisoned by the British as part of their counterinsurgency against the Kenya Land and Freedom Army.⁵³ This connection to the colonial past weighed heavily

on Ngũgĩ, as reflected in an argument he had with a guard about whether his imprisonment was like that of Jomo Kenyatta. “His case was different,” the guard insisted. “His was a colonial affair. . . . Now we are independent.” Ngũgĩ responded, “A colonial affair in an independent country, eh? The British jailed an innocent Kenyatta. Thus Kenyatta learned to jail innocent Kenyans.”⁵⁴ Ngũgĩ recounted this argument in his memoir *Wrestling with the Devil*, which he dedicated to “all writers in prison” and to “a world without prisons and detention camps.” His work speaks to the long-standing connections between struggles for decolonization, liberation, and abolition on the African continent.

The same year that Ngũgĩ was released from prison, a group of African government officials, academics, and prison administrators met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to prepare for the upcoming United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders, which had first been held in 1955. At this meeting, African delegates were meant to think through what a “regionally-specific” approach to punishment might look like. The “de-institutionalization of corrections” was one of the key agenda items, and it provided the delegates with a space to discuss the past and future of prisons and other penal institutions on the continent. In the meeting report, the delegates insisted that this issue had to be considered in the “context of African history.” “Prisons,” the report read,

had been alien to the cultural tradition of most African nations and had been introduced by colonial Powers. Prisons were repressive institutions. However, in many parts of Africa they came to be seen as unavoidable evils, a view which persisted today in various quarters, even though the former colonial powers were now embarked upon a vigorous programme of de-institutionalizing the penal system. The traditional African method of responding to wrong-doing had included community control and social reintegration, coupled with restitution, concepts which were now being accepted by modern correctional theory and practice. Because of the repressive nature of prisons, a number of African countries, upon achieving independence, decided to abolish this form of punishment. Yet no nation had wholly succeeded in doing so. . . . Inhumane prisons were, perhaps, the last vestige of suppression imported by colonial Powers, and Africa has to free itself from this vestige and find its own answers to its problems.⁵⁵

Closing this section of the report a few pages later, the delegates concluded, “The entire range of human imagination had to be mustered in the search

for alternatives to imprisonment, although, to be realistic, the ultimate disappearance of prisons was not in sight.”⁵⁶

The Addis Ababa meeting speaks to the presence, possibilities, and challenges of prison abolition on the African continent. African contributions to these struggles have recently become visible on a global stage through the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, which, although focused on the elimination of the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad, has been linked to calls for prison abolition.⁵⁷ With a few exceptions, however, such as Viviane Saleh-Hanna’s work on Nigeria or Sohela Surajpal’s dissertation, this topic has not been closely studied.⁵⁸ As Julia Chinyere Oparah argues, many scholars in the Global North—especially in the North American context—have “defined the concerns, priorities, and goals of prison studies and anti-prison activism with no regard for the experiences of scholars and activists in the Global South.”⁵⁹ As contemporary calls for abolition grow across the globe, solidarity across continents will be of vital importance.

There is much to be learned by foregrounding how Africans have connected critiques of the prison with struggles for decolonization and liberation. Along with structural and ideological continuities mentioned earlier, colonialism also permeated postcolonial punishment as a critical framing device, with Africans using comparisons to colonial rule to condemn state violence and neocolonialism. The repression of FRELIMO’s government in socialist Mozambique, for example, was seen by many as a “return to the ‘old regime’” of colonial rule, while political prisoners in Zimbabwe emphasized the “moral blameworthiness” of the independent state.⁶⁰ As Zimbabwean political prisoner Paul Themba Nyathi asked, “How can people who set up elaborate structures to free people from the humiliation, the racism of minority rule subject their people to such cruelty?”⁶¹ For many Africans, therefore, recourse or resemblance to colonial punitive tactics was seen as the ultimate betrayal of the goals of liberation struggles.

Similar critiques arose from Ugandans. This book argues that incarceration was not only indispensable to the Ugandan state’s management of dissent but also a focal point of dissent. Ugandans continuously contested the state’s use of punitive confinement, making broader arguments about the limits of freedom and decolonization in the process. This includes Abu Mayanja, a lawyer and minister who regularly challenged the Obote government’s use of detention without trial in the late 1960s. “Far from wanting to change the outmoded Colonial laws,” he wrote in an article that would lead to his own detention, “the Government of Uganda seems to be quite happy in retaining them and utilising them, especially those laws designed by the Colonial regime to suppress freedom of association and expression.”⁶²

For Mayanja and many other Ugandans, incarceration became a key arena for critiquing and challenging the coloniality of the Ugandan state. The majority of Ugandans discussed in this book were not calling for the prison's abolition, and, in some cases, their critiques actually reinforced the liberal legal order in which prisons have been able to thrive. This, however, does not undermine the fact that those inside and outside prisons raised important questions about the coloniality of confinement, its use in ongoing state violence, and the limits it placed on freedom. As societies around the world today grapple more than ever with questions about the prison's future—and very existence—such histories offer inspiration and instruction for contemporary struggles for change.

HISTORICIZING THE POSTCOLONIAL STATE IN UGANDA

Along with drawing upon critical histories of carceral systems from around the globe, this book is also in conversation with scholarship on Uganda's postcolonial history. For many years, there was very little academic inquiry into or public reckoning with the period between independence and the beginning of Museveni's presidency. Museveni actively promoted this erasure: when discussing his predecessors during his inaugural address in 1986, he urged Ugandans to "sweep that garbage where it belongs, onto the dung heap of history."⁶³ Increasingly, many Ugandans are doing the opposite, especially as they reckon with the entrenchment of Museveni's power and many of his repressive policies, which are now being read in relation to previous postcolonial governments. Much of this recent engagement has been focused on Idi Amin's military dictatorship.⁶⁴ Interest in Amin, however, is by no means new, both within Uganda and more globally. During his dictatorship and in its initial aftermath, much was written about Amin, mostly by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), journalists, and Ugandans in exile.⁶⁵ While this material offers some useful empirical evidence, it is notable for its sensationalism rather than substance, filled with graphic descriptions of torture and other forms of violence, as well as rumors about Amin's alleged cannibalistic practices. These accounts also focus overwhelmingly on Amin's personality. As Richard Reid argues, in much of the early writing on the 1970s, "Uganda was Amin, Amin was Uganda, and he dominated observers' line of vision absolutely."⁶⁶ In contrast, more recent reckonings with the 1970s have shifted the focus to the Amin state and how it was experienced.⁶⁷ This has occurred through scholarly inquiries; through sites of public memory such as the "The Unseen Archive of Amin," which first opened in 2019 at the Uganda Museum before touring across the country; and through recollections shared by Ugandans in the media, in memoirs, and in other spaces.

While this intensified interest in the Amin years is welcome, it has not been replicated in the study of Obote's time in office, which normally serves as a backdrop to the 1970s. Obote served as Uganda's second prime minister and, in 1966, seized executive power through suspending the constitution, arresting political opponents, and organizing a violent attack led by Idi Amin on Mengo Palace, which was the site of government for Kabaka Edward Mutesa, the ruler of Buganda and Uganda's first president. Following Amin's overthrow in April of 1979 through a war with Tanzania, after which there were a few short-lived regimes, Obote returned to power in a disputed election in December of 1980. His second presidency, known as the "Obote II" period, lasted until 1985, when he was overthrown yet again through a military coup, this time led by Tito Okello Lutwa, who was then quickly replaced by Museveni in 1986.

Rather than focusing on a particular postcolonial government, this book looks at multiple regimes in relation to each other.⁶⁸ This decenters the historiography from its Amin-centered bias, while also foregrounding longer-term processes that shaped the postcolonial state, thus making visible both the continuities across regimes and unique contextual political dynamics. By putting the colonial period in conversation with the 1960s–80s, this book demonstrates the recursive nature of state punishment. Each successive government mobilized the past in a paradoxical manner, borrowing directly from the repertoires of their predecessors, while also symbolically seeking to demonstrate their distance from past punitive practices. As has so often been the case throughout history, therefore, punishment was mobilized in a linear manner, used to mark progress and map distance between one regime to the next. Yet, despite performing this politics of rupture, Uganda's leaders also drew directly from tactics of their predecessors, incorporating and adapting previous laws, organizational structures, and spaces of confinement for their own purposes. For example, while Obote primarily held detainees in government prison sites during his first presidency, he began using "safe houses" more systematically in the 1980s, following the precedent set by Amin. Throughout the period under study, Uganda's postcolonial regimes used incarceration to enforce a mode of politics in which debate, dissent, and mass mobilization were brutally punished and paths to power were exclusive and violent.

There were also, however, specific events, agendas, and wider global dynamics that shaped each regime's approach to punishment. The Obote I years, which are explored in depth in chapter 4, were impacted by the factions within his own party (the Uganda People's Congress) and tensions with Buganda Kingdom and the Democratic Party, as well as his statist economic policy. Many of his penal policies fit in with those adopted by others

in Africa's first generation of postcolonial leaders, particularly the legislation surrounding detention without trial. Punishment during the Amin regime, which is analyzed in chapter 5, was shaped by his military background, expulsion of the South Asian population, the regime's "economic war," and the Uganda-Tanzania War, while the civil war of the early 1980s profoundly influenced policies during the Obote II years, which is assessed in chapter 6. These are just some of the many internal and external dynamics that had an impact on postcolonial Uganda's carceral system.

STUDYING THE POSTCOLONIAL STATE: METHODS AND SOURCES

Prisons are spaces of secrets and silences, operating "outside of public view."⁶⁹ This is even more true for other spaces of confinement, such as detention sites. Research on institutions of confinement, both past and present, is shaped by this reality. Despite UPS's "open door" policy—which was initiated in 2006 following a period of human rights reform—much of the history of confinement in Uganda remains unknown.⁷⁰ Existing accounts have either focused on the detention of the Amin years or more recent efforts at reform during Museveni's presidency.⁷¹ Such inquiries have often reinforced the dominant image of the prison in Africa: a space of violence in desperate need of reform. This book adopts a different approach, moving away from reformist prescriptions or sensationalized stories of brutality to instead focus on how incarceration was conceptualized, enacted, experienced, and contested in postcolonial Uganda.

Carceral Afterlives engages with a range of sources, including official archives, oral histories, personal collections, media sources, gray literature, memoirs, and visual sources. These were found through research in Uganda, the United Kingdom, and South Africa, as well as multiple digital collections. Like any historical work, this book grapples with the power structures that shape which narratives are made accessible about the past and which are silenced. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, there are multiple ways in which silences are (re)produced: the making of sources, the creation of archives, the moment of fact retrieval, and the assembling of histories.⁷² All of these are present in history-making processes in and about Uganda. This is glaringly obvious in relation to "Operation Legacy," the British imperial effort to remove any sensitive material from their colonies prior to independence.⁷³ This process began in Uganda in 1961 before spreading across the empire.⁷⁴ In the aftermath of colonialism, silences took hold in the archives in both violent and mundane ways, such as the burning of the *lukiiko* archives by Obote's government in the 1960s or impacts of austerity on archival spaces, which has led to decay through insects, mold, flooding, and other natural

causes.⁷⁵ Such silences also extend beyond archives. Many Ugandans who experienced the 1960s–80s are no longer alive to tell their stories on account of the war and state repression of these decades and the consequences of the structural violence that have led to a relatively low life expectancy in Uganda. Consequently, many of the sources that are the most accessible and the best preserved are generated by institutions and individuals in the Global North, reflecting asymmetries of knowledge production that are themselves tied to colonialism.

Archival sources provide the foundation for this book, reflecting the prison's entanglement in the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. These two colonial-era institutions are profoundly intertwined beyond their shared purpose of surveillance. Prison archives serve both a bureaucratic and performative purpose, creating a traceable identity that can be transmitted across time and space. The annual reports, personnel files, photographs, rule books, and other archival remnants are meant to signal the professionalism of the institution to both an internal and external audience, playing a crucial role in certifying its legitimacy. Such representations were reinforced by the official media of this period, which provided the government with an important arena in which to spread messages about the prison's role in nation building and social order. In contrast, there is almost no archival trace of other spaces of punitive confinement.

Archival sources, themselves the product of colonial bureaucracies and epistemologies, pose many challenges. In *Snakepit*, a novel about Amin's military rule, Moses Isegawa evokes the erasures and haunting that permeate archives, as well as the ways they produce banality. "It was the Western way: tragedy erased and carted away into library files where it lost bite," he writes, "later coming off the page like a shadow, bland in its weightlessness, almost a figment of the chronicler's imagination."⁷⁶ As Isegawa powerfully argues, archives are official renderings of complex experiences, cataloging violence and its effects in ways that are legible to the state. Furthermore, much of the official material is exaggerated and performative. As Peterson and Taylor write, the archives of the Amin regime were filled with "exhortatory propaganda, inflated statistics, self-regarding reportage and other fictions."⁷⁷ Read critically, such material can open a window into a regime's efforts to craft a specific image. It is also important, however, not to bypass the more mundane material that offers insight into the quotidian dimensions of government bureaucracy. By reading these documents along the archival grain as well as against it, we can peer at the pathways of power and the bureaucratic logic of the postcolonial state, teasing out both the exhortations and everyday rhythms.⁷⁸

This book is also shaped by the fact that certain groups of people who were incarcerated are more visible in the archive than others. *Carceral Afterlives* looks at two legal categories of people who were held in sites of punitive confinement: detainees, or those who were detained without trial in government prisons, “safe houses,” or camps; and prisoners, or those who were sentenced through a trial process and held in government prisons. Within the historical records, more information is available about the individual experiences of detainees, especially high-profile people who were labeled as “political prisoners,” such as government ministers and opposition politicians. Memoirs are particularly important in this regard, as they provide insight into the “socialities and intimacies forged within worlds of capture,” as well as pushing back against the state’s goal of the disappearance and erasure of those held in carceral sites.⁷⁹ Not all detainees’ experiences are well known, however, as only those with a certain level of political, economic, or social power received media coverage or benefited from wider advocacy efforts. Those categorized as convicted or “criminal” prisoners—who are often the most stigmatized group of incarcerated people—are much less visible in the source materials, with statistics standing in for individual stories.⁸⁰ This book seeks to push back against these erasures in the archive by drawing on accounts of protests within prisons, complaints written by those inside, insights provided by detainees who shared spaces with convicted prisoners, as well as reading against the grain of official materials. It is important to remember, however, the limits of these sources. As Kirsten Weld argues, “One must not confuse the rich life of a person with its thin archival record—its paper cadaver.”⁸¹ This is especially important when studying the lives of incarcerated individuals, whom the state sought to narrowly define as “criminal” and “deviant.”

Additionally, there is the challenge of providing social history insights while also protecting individual privacy. This is particularly relevant for the personnel files within UPS, which provide intimate insights into the lives of prison staff and, occasionally, those they guarded. The information within them has been included in a way that focuses on wider experiences rather than telling the stories of individuals who may not want difficult details of their lives shared.⁸² This approach recognizes that archives are repositories of human experiences that should be treated with a similar ethic of care and consideration as oral histories.⁸³

Within this book, oral histories—like archives—are treated as a form of active engagement with the past rather than a neutral recounting of experiences. As Katie Kilroy-Marc argues, “remembrance marks the transience and dynamism of the performative act of remembering, stressing how the

conscious and active invocation of the past happens *in* and *through* the present.”⁸⁴ Interviews conducted in this book were not seen as ways to fill archival gaps but instead to show how individual Ugandans—including people who were imprisoned or detained, current and former prison officers, military personnel, police officers, government officials, and the families of these individuals—chose to represent their past.⁸⁵ The interviews were deliberately conducted with the relational aspect of remembering in mind, often carried out in family homes, in tandem with loved ones, and, when possible, over a series of meetings. The stories generously shared in these interviews provide a valuable window into Ugandans’ experiences with and perceptions of the prison and other sites of confinement in the postcolonial period. Due to the sensitivity of this material, pseudonyms have been used for interviewees, except for a few individuals who have written or spoken publicly about their experiences.

Finally, the archival and oral materials were analyzed in relation to a range of media sources, memoirs, and gray literature. The stories in the *Uganda Argus*, the *Voice of Uganda*, and the *Uganda Times*—the official newspapers in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s respectively—provide a record of the government’s self-representation to a national audience. More critical media sources, such as *Munnansi* and *Drum* magazine, offered counternarratives as well as accounts of state-sponsored violence. Gray literature plays a similar role, with the testimonies of the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights and the reports of NGOs such as Amnesty International providing details on government abuses. While these help us to track the nature and scale of violence during these periods, they also support the “‘damage-centered’ research” trend that has been so pervasive when writing about colonialism and its effects, and thus they need to be used alongside other accounts.⁸⁶ Narratives of state violence were also found in memoirs of former detainees, which have proliferated in recent years. Together, these sources provide insight into how Uganda’s carceral system endured and was contested after independence.

1 ~ Colonial “Cinderella”

Prisons and Punishment in the Colonial Period

IN JANUARY 1962, Sir George Cartland, the deputy governor of Uganda, gave a speech at the annual dinner of the Uganda Prisons Service (UPS), held at the Grand Imperial Hotel in Kampala. Uganda's independence was on the horizon, and Cartland used the opportunity to reflect on the colonial prison system. Addressing the staff, Cartland praised UPS's "steady progress" over the colonial period. This, he acknowledged, had been achieved despite tremendous "difficulties" and constrained government support. "You must, in fact, feel a forgotten service," he remarked. "It is a job which produces no headlines unless there is trouble. Yours is not a service on which governments wish to spend a great deal of money." Mr. N. A. Cameron, the British-born commissioner of prisons, also shared some remarks. Looking to the future, Cameron urged the expatriate staff to give their Ugandan counterparts "every assistance" in working towards the achievement of "modern" penal standards. Emphasizing this goal, Cameron remarked, "The accepted treatment of the offender is based on the fact that he has been sent to prison not for punishment. And no one is more conscious of this than us. Public visions of clanging doors and flogging, conjured up a century ago, were utterly false."¹

These speeches encapsulated many of the issues that shaped Uganda's colonial prison system. During this time, British officials had a vexed

relationship with the idea of the “modern” prison, which proved to be a source of anxiety, aspiration, and contestation. As was the case across the continent, colonial officials framed the prison’s introduction to Uganda within the rhetoric of the “civilizing mission,” claiming that it would replace the “barbaric” punitive systems of local communities. Uganda’s prisons, however, were spaces of violence and neglect from the beginning. They were first a subsidiary of the military and then the police, and the colonial state initially made no effort to introduce a rehabilitative approach. It was not until the interwar years that some colonial officials began to express serious doubts about the lack of reforms. After World War II, reforms were initiated but their impact was limited. This period was also shaped by a significant increase in the prison population and by heightened mass prisoner resistance, as the state incarcerated more people than ever before in response to anticolonial mobilization. This chapter traces the prison system’s imposition and expansion during the colonial period. While framed as sites of “rehabilitation” and reform, prisons were ultimately places of repression, reinforcing Achille Mbembe’s view of colonialism as a “relation of power based on violence.”²

EARLY COLONIAL RULE AND THE IMPOSITION OF PRISONS

The European presence in the area now known as Uganda steadily increased from the 1850s onwards, primarily driven by Europeans searching for the source of the Nile River and missionaries seeking to spread Christianity.³ Initially, the British established control through the Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC).⁴ By 1894, Buganda Kingdom—the most powerful precolonial polity at the time—was a British protectorate, which the surrounding communities would also soon become.⁵ In 1900, the British signed the Uganda Agreement, giving Buganda an unprecedented degree of autonomy among British African colonies.⁶ Overall, Uganda had a relatively marginal status within the empire. Its governance was an example of “hegemony on a shoestring,” characterized by a minimal European presence, limited budgets, and indirect rule—all factors that had a significant impact on the prison system.⁷ Uganda’s political landscape had three distinct arenas: the protectorate sphere, which was the foundation of the colonial government; Buganda Kingdom, which was still ruled by the *kabaka*, or king; and the “native” or “African” local governments, which encompassed all communities outside of Buganda and were run by chiefs. In places such as Teso, Lango, and Bukedi, the British imposed Baganda chiefs.⁸ Through these chiefs, colonial officials sought to better control the labor supply, enforce the collection of taxes, and impose law and order.⁹

As was the case throughout the African continent, the introduction of prisons marked a shift in punitive methods in the territory now known as Uganda.¹⁰ There is, however, little reliable information on justice systems prior to colonial rule, as most of the material was either directly linked to imperial agendas—stemming from anthropologists or administrators who worked on behalf of colonial forces—or, more recently, comes from the tourist industry in Uganda.¹¹ One exception to this is Ernest Balintuma Kalibala's doctoral thesis on justice in Buganda, written while he was studying at Harvard University.¹² According to Kalibala, punishment—*okubonereza*—was based on two principles: compensation for the victim by the offender and deterrence.¹³ Multiple modes of punishment existed, including the payment of fines, property confiscation, the sale of individuals into forced labor systems, corporal punishment, confinement in stocks (*amasamba*), and capital punishment. Amasamba were “practically universal all over the country” and were often used as a form of torture that could lead to death.¹⁴ In Kalibala's view, these devices, which were banned under colonial rule, were the closest Buganda came to having prisons, as they involved physical confinement as a form of punishment. “There were no prisons in Buganda,” he writes, “but prisoners were plentiful.”¹⁵ While the system in Buganda was by no means free of violence, there were certain expectations about how to carry out punishment in a moral way. For example, Hamu Mukasa, a Ganda historian and court official, wrote disparagingly about the repressive practices of Kabaka Mutesa I, the ruler of Buganda prior to the colonial period. Mukasa argued that Mutesa was “killing people for nothing and such small offences as would nowadays, perhaps be met by a punishment of two or three weeks' imprisonment. . . . He just killed people, and attempted to kill very many people in an unthinkable cruel manner.”¹⁶ Mutesa I's practices were therefore viewed as transgressive, operating outside the boundaries of acceptable punishment.

Europeans' accounts, in contrast, are characterized by sensationalism and racism, meant to reinforce perceptions of Africans as “uncivilized” and “barbaric.”¹⁷ One of the most lurid depictions comes from Karl Peters, a German colonial official. Discussing Buganda, he wrote: “We are within the limits of the dark despotism of Central Africa. The stranger marvels at the number of human beings he encounters who have lost one eye, or both ears, or their noses, or lips; but the missionaries have stories to tell of much worse things. . . . He [the ruler] commands, and hundreds of his subjects are dragged off to the place of execution, and there put to death with fearful tortures.”¹⁸ John Hanning Speke, who came to Uganda to find the source of the Nile River, recounted numerous episodes of brutality by Mutesa, portraying

him as someone who “was indifferent to others’ suffering almost to the point of madness.”¹⁹ Accounts of punishment beyond Buganda are less common, but they are similarly condemnatory in nature.²⁰ Europeans thus used punitive practices as a strategic marker of distance between themselves and African communities, bolstering their argument that prisons were a necessary component of colonial rule.²¹ Ultimately, the colonial approach towards African forms of punishment is summarized by this line from the report of the Bushe Commission, which assessed justice systems in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika in the 1930s: “It is the duty of Government to civilize and to maintain peace and good order, and this can only be done by the introduction of British concepts of wrong doing.”²²

Whether in Buganda or elsewhere, the imposition of prisons broke with past practices. British and Ganda elites Katikkiro Apollo Kaggwa and Katikkiro Stanislaus Mugwanya set up the first two prisons in 1894, which later merged and became known first as the Kabaka’s Government Remand Prison Njabule, then as Mengo Prison.²³ Local elites thus played a pivotal role, a trend that would shape the system for many decades to come. The first two central government prisons were established in the late 1890s: Port Alice Prison in Entebbe, which was the capital city at the time, and Kampala Prison.²⁴ This reflected a pattern that persisted throughout the territory: prisons were built proximate to colonial headquarters as the British expanded their control.

Uganda’s prisons, courts, and police were developed in relation to the state’s indirect rule structure. As was the case throughout much of the British Empire, Uganda’s legal infrastructure was divided: a system modeled on British common law was introduced, which existed alongside the “customary” laws of local communities. The court system reflected such divisions. Protectorate courts were set up to try civil and criminal cases—including the High Court, which was established in 1902, as well as district courts around the territory—and “native” courts for matters pertaining to “customary” law.²⁵ As a result of the Uganda Judicial Agreement of 1905, Buganda Kingdom had a separate court system.²⁶ The majority of prisoners in the protectorate government prison system had been sentenced in the protectorate courts, whereas those sentenced in “native” courts or the Buganda Kingdom courts went to local government or Buganda Kingdom prisons respectively.²⁷ The Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Indian Criminal Procedure Code were initially used in Uganda, reflecting the circulation of colonial technologies of punishment at this time.²⁸ The IPC was not replaced until 1930, at which time Uganda got its own penal and criminal procedure codes.²⁹ This change was prompted in part by growing metropolitan unease

with the IPC's tolerance of harsh corporal punishment, particularly after a series of scandals involving settlers in neighboring Kenya who had brutally beaten their African employees to death yet received only minor sentences.³⁰

Although incarceration had a central role in the colonial justice system, it was of course situated within a wider punitive apparatus. During the colonial period, those who violated the newly imposed laws could also be punished through other mechanisms, including fines, compensation, deportation, corporal punishment, and capital punishment.³¹ During the early years, the British adapted their legislation in response to outbreaks of anticolonial activity, such as the passage of the Witchcraft Ordinance of 1912. Within this ordinance, "witchcraft" was broadly defined as "any seditious activity in which political ascendancy over the British was claimed on the basis of superior supernatural power."³² It was utilized in dramatic fashion in 1917,³³ when the British detained the leaders of the Nyabingi spiritual community in Kigezi for sowing "disaffection" against British rule.³⁴ Deportation was also used to quell anticolonial resistance, such as the deportation of Kabaka Mwanga of Buganda and Kabaleega of Bunyoro to Seychelles in 1899.³⁵

Beyond these official measures, Ugandans also faced punishment in private institutions. Those working on large industrial plantations were subjected to coercive punishment, including flogging.³⁶ Mission stations and schools were also sites of violence. For example, in 1926, the Catholic Mill Hill Mission was embroiled in a scandal in Teso District. Its members were charged with having "beaten and imprisoned natives and intimidated them into compliance with canonical directions."³⁷ While prisons were thus an important locus of colonial punitive policies, they were embedded within a wider system of punishment, many aspects of which would continue to have an impact beyond independence.

Uganda's prison system was a product of the state's indirect rule structure, with three unique yet interconnected prison services. In the interests of clarity, this book uses "prison system" to refer to all three services together. The central government or protectorate prisons are referred to by their official name, the Uganda Prisons Service; the Buganda prisons as the Buganda Kingdom prison service; and the "native" or later "local government" prisons as the local government prison service. While other colonies—such as the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Nigeria—had local and central government penal systems, the tripartite nature of Uganda's system was unique due to Buganda's relatively privileged status.³⁸ Initially, the kabaka had total control over the management of prisons and other institutions associated with law and order, including the death penalty.³⁹ The protectorate government could not intervene directly in the administration of Buganda Government

prisons; rather, it could only make suggestions about how they should be run. Most offenders within this system were imprisoned due to the non-payment of taxes, thus usually serving short sentences.⁴⁰ At smaller prisons, chiefs would use prison labor for various public and private works, and the kabaka also used prisoners' labor on their palace grounds.⁴¹ Buganda was also the largest of the three services: by the mid-1930s, there were 190 prisons in the kingdom.⁴² Most of these were *gombolola* prisons, which were under the authority of subcounty chiefs and held those with maximum sentences of three months.⁴³ Many were migrants from other parts of Uganda who had come to Buganda in search of economic opportunity.⁴⁴ *Ssaza* or county prisons were slightly larger and held offenders for six months, and Mengo Prison, located near the kabaka's palace, served as the site for long-term offenders.⁴⁵ Those designated as "habitual and refractory convicts" were transferred to UPS.⁴⁶

UPS also came into being early in the colonial period. In the 1889/1900 budget, money was allocated for warders who were "employed to cater exclusively for the needs of prisoners," marking the formal creation of UPS.⁴⁷ The 1903 Prisons Ordinance provided the original legislative framework.⁴⁸ It mapped out a strict hierarchy for prison officers, a dense clerical infrastructure, dietary scales differentiated by race, and guidelines for the separation of different types of offenders.⁴⁹ UPS expanded considerably in the early stages of colonial rule: by 1912, there were fifteen prisons throughout the country and one "judicial lock-up" in Tororo.⁵⁰ Most of these were district prisons that held offenders serving sentences of no more than six months.⁵¹ Many of these facilities were cheaply built, with Lira Prison described as a "collection of temporary and rat-ridden mud and wattle buildings."⁵² This reflected the state's limited investment in prisons, particularly early on. Colonial officials were not trying to build penitentiaries through which to reform prisoners but rather simply wanted to confine and punish those viewed as dissident or deviant.

One of the most significant developments in the first few decades of colonial rule was the construction of Luzira Prison. It opened in 1927, built on the outskirts of Kampala on a hill overlooking what colonial officials had named Lake Victoria.⁵³ The land upon which Luzira sits is said to have great spiritual significance within Buganda.⁵⁴ During the construction of the facility—which was completed using convict labor—many artifacts were found and taken to England, including the famous "Luzira Head."⁵⁵ These have not yet been repatriated back to Uganda. This process of disruption and removal has caused some to view Luzira as a haunted site, leading to stories about ghosts on the grounds and mysterious deaths.⁵⁶

Originally built to hold just over five hundred prisoners, it regularly housed more than one thousand during the colonial period.⁵⁷ Africans who had been given long-term sentences were sent to Luzira, as were all European and “Asian” offenders—the term used to refer to those from South Asia who had come to Uganda either voluntarily or forcibly through indentured labor—reflecting the racial hierarchy of the colonial state.⁵⁸ Luzira was also the place where capital punishments were carried out. Although there were some small cells, prisoners were mostly housed in association wards, which could hold at least eighty prisoners, unless they were put into solitary confinement.⁵⁹ By the close of the colonial period, the grounds contained Luzira Upper Prison—the largest prison in Uganda—Murchison Bay Prison, Kampala Remand Prison, Luzira Women’s Prison, and the Training School.⁶⁰ This sprawling site has remained the focal point of the Uganda Prisons Service to this day. Like Kamiti Prison in Kenya or Robben Island in South Africa, Luzira has become an enduring symbol of state repression.⁶¹

“Native government” prisons, as they were originally known, were also introduced into Uganda very early on in the colonial period. They were administered through local government authorities and were generally under the direct purview of a chief, who also served as the *de facto* officer in charge of the prison.⁶² Instead of a single prison ordinance, there was a range of ad hoc rules imposed by chiefs or senior prison staff. The majority of the prisoners in this system were incarcerated due to the nonpayment of poll taxes, failure to meet *luwalo*—communal labor—commitments, or adultery.⁶³ Colonial officials viewed local government prisons as sites of “lighter” and “more paternal” discipline that could be used to deal those who had committed minor offenses.⁶⁴ Along with smaller “lock-ups,” the first local government prisons were set up in the major headquarters of local government, including Masindi, Hoima, Toro, and Ankole.⁶⁵ By the mid-1930s, there were eighty-one of these prisons in the Eastern Province, twelve in the Northern Province, and fourteen in the Western Province—discrepancies that reflect the colonial state’s uneven presence within Uganda at this time.⁶⁶

In contrast to the central government system, local government prisons were highly decentralized and diverse. The facilities ranged from “mud and wattle huts” to larger structures made with brick or cement.⁶⁷ Many were in terrible condition. Upon inspecting Kiryandongo Prison in Bunyoro, for example, the assistant district commissioner expressed his disgust at the “squalor of the buildings and the ragged garments of the prisoners” and suggested that the prison was “unfit for human occupation.”⁶⁸ The *askaris*, which was the term used for the guards, received minimal formal training

and were generally drawn from either policing or military backgrounds. There was little in the way of formal rehabilitative services, with offenders spending most of their time engaged in communal works.⁶⁹ Additionally, there was no separate accommodation for female offenders; therefore, the colonial authorities urged that all women be sent to UPS prisons.⁷⁰ The use of local government prisons reflected Uganda's embrace of indirect rule and the administration's initial ambiguity about the appropriateness of creating a European-style penal system. Their existence would prove to be one of the major debates about Uganda's penal system in the twentieth century.

From the beginning, the prison system also reflected the racist ideologies that were foundational to colonial rule. Throughout the colonial period, prison personnel were racially divided, with British officers generally serving in the senior positions, "South Asians" in clerical roles, and Ugandans in the lower ranks.⁷¹ Racist colonial notions about the so-called "martial races" further shaped the recruitment policies for African prison staff. Initially, Ugandans from northern communities dominated the ranks.⁷² Many had previous military experience, as the colonial army was primarily drawn from northern regions.⁷³ In the case of the Acholi, for example, colonial officials cited their supposed "superior physique, habits of discipline, and unsophisticated outlook" as ideal qualities for policing, prisons, or military work.⁷⁴ As historian Michelle R. Moyd writes, such stereotypes had "far more to do with how colonizers viewed themselves as soldiers than they did with any objective truths about one or another group's actual suitability for soldiering."⁷⁵ Although the prison administration initiated some diversification efforts later on, those from northern Uganda consistently made up approximately half of UPS's personnel.⁷⁶

ENTANGLED IDENTITIES: PRISONS, POLICING, AND THE MILITARY

The prison system's violent origins are most clearly visible when we consider its relationship to other coercive institutions within the colonial state. Initially, it was a subsidiary of the military and then the police. In Uganda, the military presence had initially been through the IBEAC's forces and was then followed by the King's African Rifles (KAR), while the police first existed as an armed constabulary and were thus also highly militarized.⁷⁷ Prior to the passage of the Prisons Ordinance in 1903, Kampala and Port Alice prisons were staffed by a combination of soldiers from the KAR and police officers.⁷⁸ Some autonomy was achieved in 1903, but both prisons and the police remained under the authority of the Officer Commanding Troops.⁷⁹ The police gained more autonomy through the creation of the rank of inspector general of police in 1906 and became a separate service in 1908 with

the passage of the Police Ordinance and the introduction of the position of commissioner of police.⁸⁰ At this point, prisons became a subsidiary of the police. During these early decades, nearly all prison personnel had a military background. This was true for both Ugandan and British staff, the majority of whom lacked any specific knowledge of penal administration.

The prison and police services would remain formally entangled for more than three decades. The relationship between the two services was unequal, with policing work given priority. Recruits were trained in the Police Depot Training School, and the curriculum was heavily skewed in favor of policing.⁸¹ The prioritization of policing was evident throughout the country: the British police officer in charge of a given district would be the “*ex officio*” superintendent of the prison, and recruits were not required to have any prison experience.⁸² Police officers often resented this entanglement. In a memoir discussing his time in Uganda, former British police officer Christopher Harwich characterized prison work as something that he “disliked intensely.”⁸³ The Ugandan officers posted in prisons were frequently drawn from the bottom of the recruit pool. As the 1936 commission on Uganda’s prisons stated, “It appears that the tendency at present is for the pick of recruits to pass into Police Service, the Prison Department a Cinderella taking what is left.”⁸⁴

The sustained entanglement of the prison and police was not only due to their shared role in colonial coercion but also due to financial constraints. Although colonial officials often debated the prison system’s subsidiary relationship to the police, budgetary limitations prevailed for many years. Not even an intervention by the secretary of state for the colonies could secure the independence of the prison system. After requesting the division of the police and prisons services in 1929, the secretary received the following reply from the governor: “The separation of the Police and Prisons Services is a matter which will be kept in view, for action as soon as the financial position permits; but at present I am unable to recommend that the other activities of the Protectorate Government should be reduced or restricted in order to provide for it.”⁸⁵ Prisons were therefore one of the many examples of the colonial state’s strategy of “hegemony on a shoestring.”⁸⁶

Ultimately, the police and prison services were separated in April of 1938, following a sustained period of external and internal review of Uganda’s penal system.⁸⁷ The implementation of this policy, however, was slow: the two services were not fully separated until 1959, when the final police officer in charge of a district prison was replaced with a prison officer.⁸⁸ The longevity of this entanglement makes Uganda rather unique. While it was not uncommon to have joint police and prison services in other British

colonies, this persisted longer in Uganda than in many other places. The Kenya Prisons Service, for example, had become autonomous in 1911.⁸⁹ Again, this can likely be explained by financial considerations, as Uganda was less of a budgetary priority than Kenya. Although this eventual break between the police and prisons was seen as a key milestone in UPS's history, prisons would continue to be intertwined with the police and the military throughout the rest of the colonial period and after independence.

"TWENTIETH CENTURY SPECTACLES": INTERWAR DEBATES

In 1936, the governor of Uganda, Sir Phillip Mitchell, established the Prisons Committee to review the country's penal system. In a note attached to the committee's final report, scribbled in his own handwriting, Mitchell outlined his views on the matter. While he felt that precolonial punishments were characterized by a "severity . . . which to modern eyes amounts to ferocity," Mitchell argued that colonial punitive policies were still very violent. "Instead of mutilating thieves," he wrote, "we flogged them usually with great severity." Overall, Mitchell had grave reservations about the direction of Uganda's prisons. "What we have done is to copy what, without much knowledge of the subject, we thought was the practice in England some thirty or forty years ago." In closing his note, Mitchell emphasized the importance of the committee's role: "Perhaps the gravest social problem before us in East Africa today is the problem of punishment, for it is the foundation of social discipline without which no stable society can be established. We need to have courage and twentieth century spectacles in tackling it."⁹⁰

The governor's reflections came during a decade of profound reckoning regarding Uganda's penal system. During the 1930s, three major reviews were conducted. One focused solely on Uganda; the two others were part of wider imperial investigations. Together, these reviews drove the key ideological shifts within the prison system in the 1930s, reflecting the growing use of "expert" knowledge by the Colonial Office at this time and the increasing view that colonial prisons should be remade along "modern" lines. This meant adopting policies broadly similar to what David Garland has termed "penal welfarism," which had, by this point, become the dominant global model for prisons. It was premised on the belief that "penal measures ought, where possible, to be rehabilitative interventions rather than negative, retributive punishments," and that such interventions should be shaped by "scientific" knowledge gained through research in criminology and related fields.⁹¹ For prisons, this meant stressing their "re-educative purposes" and moving towards individualized treatment and "specialist custodial regimes."⁹²

These reports were microcosms of much wider debates unfolding in the interwar years. In Britain, fundamental questions were being raised about punishment, evident in the Home Office's establishment of a Committee on Corporal Punishment in the 1930s.⁹³ Greater attention was also being devoted to the state of punishment across the empire: during the interwar years, there were numerous reviews of colonial penal systems, such as the *Indian Jails Committee Report* in 1920 and the 1923 *Native Punishment Commission in Kenya*.⁹⁴ These were supplemented by external inspections, including Paterson's visits to Burma (now Myanmar) and the Caribbean.⁹⁵ Further networks were being forged between colonial prison services, such as the inaugural Conference of East African Prison Commissioners, held in Mombasa in April 1939.⁹⁶ Civil society organizations and global governance institutions were also taking an interest in colonial prisons. The Howard League for Penal Reform set up a Colonial Sub-Committee in the interwar years, while the International Prison Commission, a body of penal experts founded in 1878, also began turning its attention to prisons beyond the Global North.⁹⁷ In 1929, the latter developed the first set of universal standards for the treatment of offenders in response to the "distressing barbarities in the penal systems of a great many foreign countries."⁹⁸ Further rules were drawn up through a collaborative effort between the Howard League, the Society of Friends, and the League of Nations Union.⁹⁹ By 1934, the League of Nations officially adopted a set of "Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Offenders."¹⁰⁰ There was, therefore, a strong emphasis on reform and the implementation of universal standards.

Evaluations of Uganda's prison system unfolded within this broader global environment. The first assessment came from the Bushe Commission, which was overseen by Henry Gratton Bushe, the legal adviser to the secretary of state for dominion affairs and the colonies. The commission was set up to "inquire into the administration of criminal law in Kenya, Uganda, and the Tanganyika territory."¹⁰¹ Its report reveals several significant debates about the practices and principles of punishment in these colonies, reflecting wider trends across colonial empires. The main area of controversy was the relative "suitability" of incarceration or corporal punishment—a subject for which the commissioners received "a mass of conflicting testimony."¹⁰² The most common critiques of imprisonment were that it did not carry sufficient "stigma" among the local population, was too "comfortable," and was not an effective "deterrent."¹⁰³ This debate was tied to the principle of "less eligibility," or the idea that conditions inside prisons could not be preferable to those outside.¹⁰⁴ As Diana Paton argues in her study of prisons in colonial Jamaica, this "symbolic function of the prison did not work easily in an un-free society."¹⁰⁵

The use of corporal punishment was another key focus of the Bushe Commission, and it elicited serious disagreement. On the one hand, many “men on the spot” argued that it was “the most suitable punishment for all Africans for all offences,” with one official insisting “it is the only thing they understand.”¹⁰⁶ As Anupama Rao and Steven Pierce argue, “bodily violence” against the colonized was an “integral part of governmental practices of codifying, categorizing, and racializing difference.”¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, members of the Bushe Commission—perhaps fearful of scandals similar to that which had occurred in Kenya—argued that corporal punishment was “damaging to self respect” for those Africans who had “advanced to a certain stage of civilization” and would “brutalize” its victims.¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, the commissioners decided that the extension of corporal punishment would be a “retrograde step.”¹⁰⁹ This decision had a lasting impact, resulting in the decline—but not elimination—of corporal punishment in Uganda. By the late 1940s, it could only be used against prisoners who were involved in mutiny, inciting mutiny, or violence against another person.¹¹⁰ The Bushe Commission’s inquiry thus reaffirmed the connection between types of punishment and levels of perceived “civilization,” while also resulting in the long-term centrality of prisons in the colonial punitive apparatus.

The Prisons Committee, which carried out its investigation in 1936, provided a much more focused assessment of Uganda’s prisons. By this point in the 1930s, Uganda’s system was composed of 297 prisons across the three services and held a total of 19,263 prisoners.¹¹¹ Governor Mitchell set up the committee to “review the existing Prisons policy and organization.”¹¹² The committee’s findings were largely negative. Luzira was characterized as a “grandiose scheme” that was overly expensive, while the remaining prison sites were viewed as “old fashioned, insanitary and ruinous buildings,” the majority of which should be “condemned.”¹¹³ The committee decried the lack of segregation within prisons and stressed the “urgent need for improving the type of native prison warder,” characterizing them as “guards and nothing else” who took “no interest in the mental welfare or the psychology of those under their charge.”¹¹⁴ As Julius Lewin, a member of the Howard League’s Colonial Sub-Committee, wrote in a review of the committee’s findings, “The facts disclosed in the Report do not make for pleasant reading.”¹¹⁵

Debates about the purpose of colonial incarceration profoundly shaped the committee’s report. While committee members agreed that the current state of Uganda’s prisons was deplorable, there was uncertainty about the extent to which a British-style system should be introduced. This is most clearly reflected in one of the report’s appendices: “A visit to the Central Prison at Luzira provokes the question—what is the good of it all? What

are we aiming at, and what are we achieving, in keeping all these men locked-up—some of them for many years—in an atmosphere as different as possible from that to which they are accustomed, and at considerable expense to the Government?”¹¹⁶ While praising the “training for citizenship” offered within prison, the author also suggested that a “slavish” imitation of the British system was not desirable and that prisoners should perform manual labor, as this would make them more “industrious and alert” while laying the foundation for “citizenship.”¹¹⁷ This connection between ideas of “good” citizenship and prisoners’ labor would have an enduring impact on the Ugandan state, taking on new dimensions after independence. The Prisons Committee’s report helped to lay the foundation for this policy shift. As part of this, it suggested that four provincial prisons be built in rural areas to keep prisoners away from “public view” and to shelter warders from the “distractions and temptations of town life.”¹¹⁸ Within these sites, prisoners would be engaged in farming. “Uganda being primarily an agricultural country, we consider that prison occupations should be directed towards keeping natives on the land,” the committee stated.¹¹⁹ This not only reflected the wider colonial policy of prioritizing agriculture—specifically cash crops—over industrial development, but it also reflected the Europeans’ fear that rapid urbanization would lead to an increase in crime and the moral “corruption” of African colonial subjects.¹²⁰

In keeping with the goal of creating “modern” prisons, the committee made several other key recommendations that would have a lasting effect on Uganda’s penal system. It suggested creating a cohort of more professional prison officers, with 60 percent of the staff working as armed “guards” and the remaining 40 percent as prison officers.¹²¹ The latter would be drawn from those “men of a higher character and of a degree of education.”¹²² The committee also called for the separation of the police and prison services. “The prison service of any Colony should be staffed from top to bottom by men who are carefully selected, suitably trained and adequately paid,” the report stated.¹²³ “Prison administration is a science, and those who are accorded a place in it should be accorded also the status that the difficulty of their task demands.”¹²⁴ As a result, Uganda’s prison and police services were finally separated.

The final review, which was conducted in 1939 by Alexander Paterson—the commissioner of prisons for England and Wales—thus came at a crucial transitional period, as Uganda’s prison system had just become autonomous. Most significantly, he singled out Uganda as having “led the way” in the creation of professionalized prison staff.¹²⁵ Paterson commended the introduction of the rank of assistant African gaoler, which had been

created in 1936.¹²⁶ It was intended for “Africans of superior education” who were deemed capable of holding senior leadership positions.¹²⁷ These new officers, Paterson argued, would serve as intermediary figures between the African staff and the British administrators: “Trained for the most part at Makerere College, they can grasp the policy of the Administration, still African at heart, they can understand the reaction of the staff. . . . It is for them to interpret the European and African mind to each other.”¹²⁸ Paterson insisted that these recruits “need not be great scholars, ringed with academic honours,” but rather “human beings with such distinction of character and personality as to ensure their control of others.”¹²⁹ Rather than relying on former soldiers, Paterson’s commentary pointed to the state’s prioritization of creating a cadre of professional prison staff. As is discussed in subsequent chapters, this had a significant impact after independence, with prison officers viewing themselves as specialized experts who were distinct from the military and police.

REFORM, RESISTANCE, AND REPRESSION IN THE LATE COLONIAL PERIOD

Many of the changes inaugurated in the 1930s were put on hold with the outbreak of World War II. Ugandans were impacted by the war in multiple ways, from the nearly eighty thousand soldiers who were enlisted to the financial support given to Britain through the increase in commodity production and taxation.¹³⁰ The prison system was affected by the labor and production needs of the empire in wartime. UPS staff and prisoners contributed to the running of the railway, the East African Power and Lighting Company, and the Kampala and Entebbe Township Authorities.¹³¹ At least 50 warders and 150 prisoners were engaged in such efforts in Kampala and Entebbe, with more being employed in other parts of the country.¹³² Through prisoners’ labor in the industrial workshops, UPS manufactured seventeen thousand military uniforms and also produced materials for the wartime internment camps that had been set up in Uganda.¹³³ Such efforts did not go unnoticed. Following the war, the colonial administration applauded UPS for helping “so cheerfully in this emergency” and gave all prisoners involved in the war effort a remission on their sentences—one of the few times that the colonial government enacted clemency measures of this kind.¹³⁴ The war also resulted in a wave of new recruits, as the Ugandan Civil Reabsorption Office provided jobs for the “better type” of demobilized soldiers within UPS, a decision that echoed back to the prison’s militarized origins.¹³⁵

In the aftermath of the war, colonial administrators in Uganda introduced an ambitious penal reform agenda, building on the recommendations from the interwar inquiries. This agenda was again shaped by wider

debates and changes within Britain and its empire. One of the most notable developments within the metropolitan context was the passage of the 1948 Criminal Justice Act, which brought an end to penal servitude, flogging, and hard labor in British prisons.¹³⁶ The act also resulted in greater differentiation in the penal system—including the expansion of alternative options to incarceration such as “Borstal” institutions for youth—and, at least on paper, a greater emphasis on rehabilitation.¹³⁷ Additionally, the Colonial Office enacted many wider changes in this period, particularly the Colonial Development and Welfare Act (CDWA) in 1940, which was meant to bring an end to colonies’ financial self-sufficiency through at least a fivefold increase in the funds available for development.¹³⁸ More funds were made available after 1945 following the end of wartime financial constraints.¹³⁹ Proponents of this act framed it in existential terms. As Secretary of State for the Colonies Malcolm MacDonald remarked, “If we are not now going to do something fairly good for the Colonial Empire, and something which helps them to get proper social services, we shall deserve to lose the colonies and it will only be a matter of time before we get what we deserve.”¹⁴⁰ Prison reform was a component of this new approach, with the CDWA bill outlining how “the provision of social justice, prisons and the administration of justice” were important components of welfare.¹⁴¹ The Colonial Office also created the Advisory Committee on the Treatment of Offenders in the Colonies, which “espoused a universal reformist model for colonial penalty.”¹⁴² Pressures for penal reform in the colonial context also increased among civil society groups such as the Aborigines Rights’ Protection Society, the Anti-Slavery Society, the Fabian Colonial Bureau, and the Howard League. Rather than questioning the use of prisons, the British state and advocacy groups insisted they could be reformed, reflecting the deeply entrenched view that prisons were a necessary part of “modern” justice systems. As Angela Davis writes, “‘prison’ and ‘reform’ have been inextricably linked since the beginning of the use of imprisonment as the main means of punishing those who violate social norms.”¹⁴³

For Uganda and other British African colonies, this new approach translated into several specific changes to the penal systems. In Nigeria, for example, the new Ten Year Plan for Social and Economic Progress—which came from the CDWA funds—allocated specific financial resources to improve the prison system.¹⁴⁴ In Uganda, more opportunities for paid prison labor emerged through CDWA-funded initiatives, including the Namulonge Cotton Growing Research Station, which had over two hundred prisoners working there by 1959,¹⁴⁵ the Kigumba Agricultural Experimental Farm, and antimalarial and drainage works.¹⁴⁶ The most significant change in

this period, however, was the major increase in prison expenditure: in 1946, the expenditure on prisons in Uganda was £55,944, whereas by 1960 it had reached £707,388.¹⁴⁷ This substantial increase was mostly due to the shift from wartime constraints to an environment of greater government spending on prisons and other institutions associated with “welfare.”

The increase in funds and the adoption of a more reformist ethos led to several changes in Uganda’s prisons, but these were primarily performative rather than substantial. It is, however, important to examine this reform agenda, as it reveals what the British saw as markers of “modern” prisons, which would shape perceptions after independence. Several reforms emphasized prisoners’ well-being, including more balanced dietary scales, an end to dietary differences based on race, and more emphasis on recreation and rehabilitation activities.¹⁴⁸ Others focused on the specialization of the penal system, in keeping with the penal welfare model espoused at the time. Whereas there were thirteen protectorate prisons in 1946, including one central prison, one prison farm, and eleven district prisons,¹⁴⁹ there were twenty-nine in 1959.¹⁵⁰ These included industrial training prisons, agricultural training prisons, prisons with different levels of security based on the category of prisoner, camps for recidivist prisoners where they would engage in public works or farming, a women’s prison, a youth prison, a prison for those classified as “lepers,” district prisons, prison farms, a women’s prison farm, and schools for juvenile offenders.¹⁵¹ Considerable attention was devoted to juvenile offenders, evident in the creation of the 1958 McKisack Committee of Enquiry into the Problem and Treatment of Juvenile Delinquency in Uganda, which was one of the most extensive investigations into issues of juvenile offenders in any British African colony.¹⁵² There was also a focus on “habitual criminals,” whom the colonial state considered a “menace to society.”¹⁵³ According to the Penal Code, a “habitual prisoner” was someone who had been incarcerated four or more times for serious offenses.¹⁵⁴ Through the Habitual Criminals (Preventive Detention) Ordinance, these individuals could be detained in penal institutions and put through a program that would ostensibly help them to “live an honest life” after their release, mainly through involvement in agricultural or industrial labor.¹⁵⁵ A separate facility—the Preventive Detention Prison at Tororo—was built for this group of prisoners.¹⁵⁶ In contrast, there was less of a focus on those categorized as “lunatics,” who were often sent to prisons despite UPS officers’ insistence that it was “not properly equipped for the custody of the insane and prison officers are not trained in their treatment.”¹⁵⁷

The government also oversaw the creation of a probation service during this period. The colonial state envisioned probation as both an alternative

to imprisonment that would provide “deviant” individuals with guidance to lead them away from crime and a service to help former prisoners.¹⁵⁸ Again, this was shaped by international penal trends at the time. In 1948, for example, Uganda’s probation officer visited Kenya to study the prison service there and made contacts with officers in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Zanzibar, and Cyprus.¹⁵⁹ Writing in 1955, he commented, “So far the endeavor has been to aim for the international standard of probation work,” with the eventual goal that an “officer in Uganda could compare equally with the high standard of officers, for example, in the United Kingdom,” which was, unsurprisingly, held up as the standard of model penalty.¹⁶⁰ The Discharged Prisoners’ Aid Society, a voluntary organization that was set up in Uganda in 1957, also contributed to offenders’ reintegration efforts following their release from prison,¹⁶¹ including building a hostel in which former prisoners could stay as they transitioned back into society.¹⁶² This organization persisted after independence and continues to operate in Uganda to this day. Its role reflects the wider trend of civil society organizations stepping in to provide prison aftercare services—an element of penal policy that continues to be neglected by governments in many parts of the globe.

While many of these reforms centered on bringing colonial prisons into line with British practices, there was also an emphasis on the prison’s role as a driver of economic development. While Britain had increasingly moved away from penal labor in any form—beginning with the Gladstone Report and fully implemented with the 1948 Criminal Justice Act—it was seen as a vital aspect of colonial penal policy.¹⁶³ Beginning in the interwar years, colonial officials began to advocate for the “civilizing” value of prison labor across British Africa, again reflecting how racist ideas influenced punitive practices. As Stacey Hynd writes, many colonial administrations across the continent emphasized how “industrial training” within prisons could “create modern, economically productive, and disciplined colonial subjects” in the late colonial period.¹⁶⁴ In Uganda, the colonial state sought to find new ways to harness the labor of local populations in the postwar period. This grew out of interwar reforms: *kasanvu* labor, which was imposed by the colonial government and involved mandatory labor on public works paid below market rates, was abolished in 1923.¹⁶⁵ *Luwalo* labor, which entailed a month of unpaid work at the local government level and often became a source of personal labor for chiefs, was ended in 1934, although, in practice, chiefs still extracted unpaid labor from their populations.¹⁶⁶ Accordingly, there was a growing need for prison labor in the interwar years. Colonial officials, however, were aware that they had to tread carefully, especially in light of the passage of the Forced Labor Convention of 1930 by the International Labor Organization.¹⁶⁷

Many colonial officials, however, insisted that prison labor and the “civilizing mission” were compatible. In Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, this led to the introduction of industrial training workshops within penal sites, prison farms, and extramural camps or detention camps for short-term offenders.¹⁶⁸ Colonial officials argued that prison labor had many benefits, including training prisoners in skills that could prevent them from recidivism, making prisons more self-sufficient, providing a labor force for public works projects, and generating public revenue through the sale of prison products. Prisoners’ labor was thus deemed to be an asset rather than a hindrance in the creation of more “modern” penal systems. Within Uganda, prison farms and industries were the primary focus. Although smaller farm sites had long been attached to prisons, the first stand-alone farm was opened in Busoga in eastern Uganda in 1942, with the dual objective of increasing food production in response to wartime needs and educating offenders in “agricultural methods.”¹⁶⁹ At least three more farms were added in the late colonial years, including Butabika Prison Farm for female prisoners.¹⁷⁰ Prison industries, which had been in place since the early twentieth century, also expanded significantly at this time. Initial efforts had focused on “self-sufficiency,” but industrial production became increasingly tied to providing government revenue and specialized training for prisoners.¹⁷¹ Whereas only carpentry, tailoring, mat production, and basket production were offered in 1931, over

FIGURE 1.1. Chain-link fence making at Upper Prison, Luzira, 1950s. United Kingdom National Archives.



twenty industrial crafts were available by 1956.¹⁷² The Luzira Prison complex had many industrial workshops, including those designed for printing, tailoring, carpentry, and chain-link fence production (see figure 1.1).¹⁷³

The government promoted prison goods to enhance perceptions of the prison as a site of rehabilitation. This was most apparent in the “Prisons’ Week” held in Kampala in December 1959, which included an exhibition of prison products in Lugogo Stadium.¹⁷⁴ Government officials and members of the public flocked to the event, which was meant to “give employers an excellent opportunity to see for themselves what is being done in Protectorate prisons as regards trade training.”¹⁷⁵ Photographs of this event provide a striking visual representation of UPS’s performance of penal modernity. In the photos, crowds of European settlers and colonial officials dressed in military uniforms, white dresses, and tailored suits inspect the range of prison goods on display, from baskets to boats. A sign perched in front of an embroidery exhibit instructed the audience about how such goods were tied to wider “rehabilitative” aims: “The object of the training and treatment of prisoners is to encourage them to lead a good and useful life on discharge and to fit them to do so.”¹⁷⁶ While colonial officials extolled the rehabilitative benefits of prison industrial training, these systems were ultimately, as Hynd argues, “focused on state development and modernization more than individual reform” across the continent, and Uganda was no exception to this trend.¹⁷⁷

FIGURE 1.2. Exhibition of prison products, Lugogo Stadium, Kampala, 1959. United Kingdom National Archives.



Along with the expansion of prison farms and industries, another key trend in this period was the significant rise in the prison population (see chart 1.1). A total of 11,439 prisoners were admitted in 1957; 14,227 in 1958; and 16,677 in 1959.¹⁷⁸ By 1960, a total of 19,480 people were committed to UPS institutions alone, leading to severe overcrowding and heightened tensions within prisons.¹⁷⁹ It should be noted that this represented only about half of Uganda's total prison population, as many more were held within the Buganda prison service and local government prisons.¹⁸⁰

The rise of the prisoner population within UPS must be situated in the context of increased anticolonial mobilization from 1945 onwards, to which the state responded through violence and widespread incarceration. The first major mobilization occurred in January 1945. A general strike unfolded throughout the country, motivated by a range of issues including the non-payment of war bonuses, low wages, and the frustration of certain groups in Buganda towards the elite classes.¹⁸¹ Demonstrations occurred in multiple regions and involved the sabotage of transport infrastructure, attacks on shops, and assaults on South Asian business owners and the police.¹⁸² In response, the government brought in the KAR to support the police, arrested several hundred people, detained trade union officials, and deported several of the key leaders of the strike—including Ignatius K. Musazi—to northern Uganda.¹⁸³ Prince Ssuna of Buganda, who had been involved in the disturbances and sought to undermine the kabaka's power, was deported to the Ssesse Islands.¹⁸⁴ These removals were carried out using the Deportation Ordinance of 1908,¹⁸⁵ which gave the governor the power to deport individuals either to a different region of the protectorate or outside its territory if he felt that “persons are conducting themselves so as to be dangerous to peace and good order in Uganda.”¹⁸⁶ Over 500 of those involved in the strike were

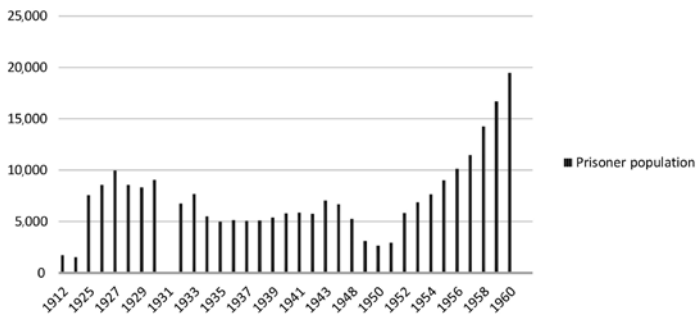


CHART 1.1. Data from UPS Annual Reports, 1912–61. Please note that some years are missing either because the data was not recorded or a copy of that year's annual report could not be found.

prosecuted, and nearly 350 were convicted, mainly on “riot” charges.¹⁸⁷ This response was illustrative of the punitive tactics that the colonial state continuously used to quell anticolonial dissent, including military repression, imprisonment, and deportation.

Following the events of 1945, a series of mass protests occurred. The next mobilization happened in Buganda Province in April 1949. Farmer and trade union members played a key role in these protests, demanding both economic autonomy—particularly over cotton, for which Uganda was the largest African producer in the British Empire—and the independence of Buganda.¹⁸⁸ There were protests and arson attacks on the homes of elites in Buganda who supported the colonial state, many of which were organized by the Uganda Farmers’ Union and its leader, Musazi.¹⁸⁹ In response, the government declared Buganda a “disturbed area,” declared a state of emergency, and called in the KAR yet again. Eight African protesters were killed, and approximately two thousand were arrested.¹⁹⁰

There were further anticolonial mobilizations in the 1950s. In the early years of the decade, the most significant event was the colonial state’s decision to deport Kabaka Muteesa II. As Jonathon Earle argues, the “deportation of the king was the central event around which anti-colonial struggle in Buganda was largely organized,” as it “fundamentally altered the emotional and political topography of the region.”¹⁹¹ Women in Buganda played a key role in campaigning for the kabaka’s return, which was secured in late 1955. Unsurprisingly, his return was widely celebrated in Buganda. For the staff and prisoners at Mengo—the largest prison in the kingdom—however, this celebration quickly became a crisis. In honor of Mutesa’s arrival, a select number of prisoners were released. As announcements of the kabaka’s appearance were made over the radio, some of those who had been excluded from the release started to protest and sought to escape, seizing the keys to the main gate and throwing objects such as bricks and plates at the staff.¹⁹² Over six hundred prisoners were involved in this mass mobilization.¹⁹³ As had been the case outside of the prison walls, this dissent was met with violence. The situation escalated significantly when warders began carrying out “a series of reprisals” involving “brutal and inhuman beatings” after the uprising had been suppressed, leaving sixteen prisoners severely injured and one dead.¹⁹⁴ In response, a formal commission of inquiry was appointed, composed of a protectorate high court judge and two chiefs from the Buganda government.¹⁹⁵ Ultimately, the commissioners identified the return of the kabaka and the subsequent decision to release prisoners as the main drivers of the uprising and denounced the assaults by the warders.¹⁹⁶ As a result of these findings and the subsequent trial, six prison staff were imprisoned.¹⁹⁷ While

the Mengo Prison protest did lead to some calls for the Buganda system to be merged with UPS, the autonomy of the system was maintained. Instead, the focus was placed on the need to reform Buganda's prisons, and the kabaka's government gave its "assurance that no effort would be spared in the future to improve the efficiency of the Buganda prison system."¹⁹⁸ Once again, reform was the proposed solution to problems within Uganda's prisons.

Further issues surfaced in other prisons around the country. In October of 1957, nearly all of the staff at Bufulubi Prison—which was run by local government authorities—in eastern Uganda went on strike.¹⁹⁹ The askaris removed their uniforms and refused to work, leaving over four hundred prisoners locked in their cells.²⁰⁰ In a letter outlining their grievances, the askaris complained that they did not have sufficient material resources to meet the needs of their families, lamenting their low pay, inadequate housing, and lack of land. The askaris also argued that they were not treated in a dignified manner by the chiefs, who made them work like "house boys."²⁰¹ They decried the "excessive aggression, excessive looking down-upon, and the mistreatment we are given as though we were inhuman" experienced while employed in Bufulubi Prison and declared that they were "not in a position to bear it any longer and stay at work, certainly not before things are put right."²⁰² As was the case in the Mengo Prison uprising, the prison staff were punished for their actions. The judge presiding over the askaris' case dismissed their concerns and sentenced them to two months in prison.²⁰³ The commission appointed to investigate the strike further discredited their claims as "untrue or frivolous."²⁰⁴ The commission's report concluded that Bufulubi was in a dismal state, commenting, "The warders' food was free, discipline was lax and a reign of terror was established over the prisoners to such an extent that they dare not complain."²⁰⁵ This case raises questions about the conditions and violence within local government prisons while also reflecting how askaris harnessed discourses of professionalism and respectability as they advocated for better working conditions—a trend that would continue after independence.

Along with strikes by both prisoners and prison staff, escape was another key form of resistance in carceral spaces. As historian Florence Bernault writes, escape was a "major form of revolt against the prison" across the African continent, one that should be read not simply as individual acts of protest but rather as speaking to the "collective character of mobilization against incarceration, as escapees benefited from many forms of complicity: the help of African guards, protection from relatives, and public consensus that strongly rejected that prison as a tool of foreign oppression."²⁰⁶ This had long been an issue in Uganda's prisons and frequently elicited criticisms from senior officials. For example, the provincial commissioner of the Eastern

Province was alarmed to hear that of the fifty-eight prisoners who were admitted to Bugabula Jail (a local government prison) in 1929, forty-six had escaped. This, he remarked, “was an amazing state of affairs and I should like some explanation.”²⁰⁷ Escapes were a persistent issue throughout the colonial period, especially in the 1950s. Within UPS, the number of annual prisoner escapes surpassed one hundred for the first time in 1952, and this trend continued for several more years.²⁰⁸ In part, this increase can be explained by the greater emphasis on prison labor, as most escapes took place while prisoners were at work. In 1955, for example, 85 of the 126 prisoners who escaped did so “from outside whilst at work.”²⁰⁹ It likely also reflects, however, the wider atmosphere of dissent and resistance within penal sites during this period, as many prisoners were involved in anticolonial mobilization. Escape was also a major issue in local government prisons, where surveillance was more limited. During 1956, for example, there were 498 escapes from Busoga District prisons, representing nearly 70 percent of the prison’s average population that year.²¹⁰ Such issues persisted until the very last stages of colonial rule: in November 1961, a government official in Kotido wrote that he was “disturbed” by the “large number of prisoners” who had escaped.²¹¹

Outside of the prison, further anticolonial mobilizations continued. The next major protest occurred in 1959, when the Uganda National Movement launched a boycott of non-African products.²¹² The police and the KAR were deployed to quell the protests, over two hundred protesters were arrested, and six of the movement’s leaders were deported.²¹³ Initially, they were sent to Gulu, a city in the northern region of Uganda, but concerns about their connections with local politicians and traders resulted in debates about their relocation.²¹⁴ Initially, government officials had suggested putting them in Moroto Prison, but this was later abandoned due to fears about “adverse comment in Buganda and the United Kingdom.”²¹⁵ Colonial officials then created a plan known as “Operation Cold Storage” that year, through which they would create a settlement in Kotido—which was chosen because it was “reasonably remote from the outside world”—for up to one hundred deportees.²¹⁶ They were to be sent without their families, housed in “uniports,” and guarded by policemen. The conditions, colonial officials admitted, were “very similar” to a “detention camp.”²¹⁷ This plan appears to have been abandoned, however, due to the objections raised by the attorney general, as it did not align with the parameters of the Deportation Ordinance and would result in successful habeas corpus cases in the courts, defeating the point of the deportations.²¹⁸ Furthermore, there was great concern within the Colonial Office about the use of anything resembling a detention camp, particularly after the infamous “Hola Massacre” in neighboring Kenya, where

eleven detainees had been beaten to death.²¹⁹ Instead of moving ahead with the Kotido camps, the state sent particularly high-profile leaders to different areas to avoid further mobilization. Godfrey Binaisa, for example, was deliberately separated from E. M. K. Mulira.²²⁰ Binaisa was sent from Luzira Upper Prison to Moroto, where he was under strict surveillance.²²¹ He was not allowed any visitors without permission, could not go more than two hundred yards from his residence at night without notifying a police officer or the district commissioner, and he could not attend public meetings or have any wireless transmitting devices.²²² The colonial state thus continued its pattern of deporting the leaders of anticolonial struggles while imprisoning others involved in protests.

The final major mass mobilization came in 1960. Significant protests erupted in Bukedi District in eastern Uganda. These were sparked by the tax assessment made by the chiefs, which many locals deemed inequitable.²²³ Protesters attacked government property and personnel.²²⁴ In total, twelve people were killed, over twelve hundred were arrested, and significant damage was done to government property.²²⁵ The incarceration of the Bukedi protesters led to the highest prison population in the colony's history, as over nineteen thousand people were imprisoned in UPS that year. The "resultant overcrowding" the annual prison report stated, "was a serious embarrassment."²²⁶ As conditions worsened in the prisons, those inside began to mobilize, particularly in Luzira. In July and August of 1960, prisoners at Luzira staged a series of protests, particularly those in the punishment cell area.²²⁷ On August 29, for example, they refused to return to their cells, work, or eat.²²⁸ The prisoners' numerous grievances included insufficient and low-quality food, being kept outside in the heavy rain, and a recent assault by warders during a cell inspection.²²⁹ Although there was some dialogue between the prisoners and the commissioner to address these grievances, the strike ended when a riot squad was brought in, reflecting the colonial state's use of violent methods to address resistance.²³⁰ In subsequent investigations into the incident, Visiting Justice A. A. Baerlin dismissed the prisoners' grievances as "nonsense," while the commissioner of prisons argued that the strike had been planned to "cause embarrassment to the Government."²³¹ The commissioner noted that the strike had been organized by a "hard core" element of the prisoners and that one of the ringleaders had been heavily involved in the Bukedi protests.²³² Like many governmental inquiries in this period, this process privileged the perspectives of colonial officials while undermining the claims of incarcerated people.

Beyond Luzira, other protests occurred during this time. In November of 1961, less than a year before independence, there was a prisoners' protest

at Fort Portal Prison.²³³ The prisoners refused to work and had reportedly attacked the warders when they tried to force them to get back on the job. As a result, a police riot squad was brought in. The prisoners had a range of complaints, including the lack of medical attention, the locking up of their protest leaders in punishment cells, and poor work conditions. In keeping with the Luzira incidents, these complaints were dismissed as “frivolous” [*sic*] and the protesting prisoners were charged with mutiny, riot, assault, and attempting to assault a prisoner officer and lost much of their remission and privileges within the prison.²³⁴

The late 1950s and early 1960s were therefore a turbulent time in Uganda’s prisons. Each of the three prison services experienced strikes and other forms of unrest due to the actions of either the prisoners or the prison staff. These disturbances were intimately intertwined with the wider anticolonial grievances of the period. They also underscore the state’s ongoing reliance on coercion to manage the prison, as well as the superficiality of the reform and rehabilitation agenda that had been so central to discussions of prisons in late colonial Uganda. Such contradictions were, unsurprisingly, silenced in the official commissions appointed to investigate such events. In the last major inspection of Uganda’s prisons in the colonial period, O. V. Garratt—the adviser on prison administration for the secretary of state for the colonies—insisted that Uganda’s prison policies now conformed to “modern ideas.”²³⁵ While meant to deflect criticisms of Uganda’s prisons, his comments also reflect the centrality of carcerality and coercion in so-called modern governance.



Over the course of the colonial period, prisons and a wider colonial penal apparatus were imposed, expanded, and entrenched in Uganda. Presented by the colonial state as an important part of the “civilizing mission,” the prison was framed as a humane and progressive form of punishment. Yet Uganda’s prison system, much like others elsewhere, was a site of violence used by the state to manage those perceived to be “deviant.” This was especially clear in the late colonial period, when the state responded to anticolonial mobilizations by incarcerating thousands of Ugandans and deporting their leaders, another form of punitive confinement. During the post–World War II period, the prison also had an important economic purpose: along with being a place to punish those who didn’t participate in the colonial capitalist economy, it also became a site where prisoners’ labor could be exploited in the name of “development.” Many of the features of the colonial penal system would leave a lasting imprint after independence.

2 ~ A National Prisons Service

ON OCTOBER 1, 1965, nearly three years after Uganda had gained its independence, the Uganda Prisons Service (UPS) hosted its first ever conference for technical staff. On that Friday, about fifty civilian employees gathered in the senior officers' mess at the Luzira Prison grounds. While often a space of leisure where high-ranking officers could relax and socialize, the mess was regularly repurposed for important meetings or receptions honoring guests. Unlike the uniformed officers, who were charged with custodial duties, the technical staff instructed prisoners in farming, industrial work, and construction. By the mid-1960s, there were over fifty staff working in the nearly forty industrial workshops and more than twenty farms operated by UPS. Although this push for agricultural and industrial production had begun in the late colonial period, it had gained a newfound intensity after independence, becoming attached to wider nation-building agendas.

To open the conference, Minister of Internal Affairs Basil Batarigaya addressed the delegates. In his speech, Batarigaya mapped out the government's vision for UPS, situating it within a linear narrative of global penal progress. "The old theories that criminality was hereditary, and the Lombrosian doctrine that criminals have certain physical features," he exclaimed, "could not stand the test of a scientific age and have therefore been discarded. It is now accepted that criminality is the product of human society and environment and that nobody is born a criminal. Society now acknowledges this fact and also recognises and respects human dignity and rights."¹ As a result

of this shift, Bataringaya explained, the world had seen “the abandonment of punitive methods of dealing with criminals such as pillory, stocks, mutilation, branding . . . and all other forms of physical torture.” Instead, he argued, “the modern concept of criminal justice is reclamation and social rehabilitation of the offender. . . . It becomes the function of the Penal Institution to try and reform and return the offender to society as a law-abiding citizen.”²

Employing a global grammar of human rights and rehabilitation, Bataringaya’s speech reflected the official approach of UPS in the immediate aftermath of independence. Focusing on the 1960s and 1970s, this chapter examines how the Ugandan state connected UPS to nation-building ambitions. As one Ugandan minister commented in the 1970s, “the Prisons Department identifies itself fully with the aspirations of Uganda.”³ This chapter critically analyzes how prisons were represented by the Obote I and Amin states, focusing on the initial decades after independence. While there were some continuities in the 1980s, the realities of war greatly changed the landscape in which the prison system functioned, and thus that period is treated separately in chapter 6.

Seeking to overcome the prison’s status as a hated symbol of colonial oppression, Uganda’s leaders sought to present this institution as a symbol of “modern” governance and a driver of economic development. Government officials actively cultivated a positive image of UPS in the public sphere through events such as parades, ceremonies honoring the release of prisoners, and national holidays. They also celebrated the productive power of prison farms and industries, building on the infrastructure set up in the late colonial period. Finally, the government sought to create a more truly national prison system through recruitment and transfer policies, as well as attempts to merge Uganda’s three distinct prison services. While all of this was meant to mark a break with the colonial past, Uganda’s leaders borrowed heavily from both the ideological and institutional legacy of colonialism.

In analyzing state representations, this chapter focuses primarily on government archives and the official media. These were sites of propaganda, performance, and politics. There was a significant disjuncture between what was being presented on paper about the prison and the lived realities of carceral spaces. Studying the “discursive field” of the postcolonial state, however, is important not because of how it reflects reality but rather because of the reality that it seeks to project.⁴ These discourses played a key role in setting expectations about what the prison system should and should not be, and this had a significant effect on how government officials, prison staff, prisoners, and the wider Ugandan populace understood—and, in many cases, critiqued—the prison.

COLONIAL CONTINUITIES:
UGANDA'S PRISON SYSTEM AFTER INDEPENDENCE

In July of 1974, another group of delegates gathered in the senior officers' mess, this time for a meeting of the Uganda Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society. George Ssentamu, the commissioner of prisons, opened the proceedings. In his speech, he emphasized not only the professionalism of UPS but also how much it had changed since British rule. "Any prison in Uganda today," he exclaimed, "is no longer a place of terror and torture as it used to be during colonial times." Whereas Batarangaya's speech in 1965 offered a much broader narrative of penal progress, Sseentamu emphasized the rupture from British rule, flipping the script by positioning colonial prisons as backwards. He insisted that Uganda's prison system had become more humane and effective after independence, through "modern tactics for reformation and rehabilitation" that helped prisoners to "join the community freely and happily to contribute to the development of our country."⁵

Ssentamu's emphasis on the break between Uganda's colonial and postcolonial prisons, however, was overstated. As was the case across many former colonies, the penal system that Uganda inherited at independence was deeply shaped by colonial policies and priorities. This was not unique to UPS. Much of the institutional infrastructure of the colonial state—including hospitals, schools, and police facilities—continued to exist after independence.⁶ Although at times imbued with new aims, the "imprint of colonialism" remained in most of these institutions.⁷ This coloniality is perhaps most striking at the material level. Most of the prisons built during British rule remained in use after independence, including the Luzira complex, which retained its status as the primary maximum-security facility in the country. While existing facilities were expanded and upgraded to an extent, the physical infrastructure from the colonial period remained largely unchanged.⁸ This included the ways in which prisons were categorized, a system that was inherited from the colonial state and influenced by wider global penal trends. By 1969, facilities included one maximum-security prison, twelve prison farms, one "habitual criminal" preventive detention camp, one reception and allocation center, eleven district prisons, two women's prisons, one young prisoners' prison, one youthful offenders' reformatory school, and three remand prisons.⁹ There was thus no structural or physical overhaul of Uganda's prisons after independence.

Other continuities were apparent in terms of personnel and policies. As is discussed in chapter 3, the senior Ugandan officers who took over UPS had been trained during the colonial period and educated primarily

in mission schools. Many had spent time in the United Kingdom as part of their training. From the uniforms they wore to the routines and drills that they engaged in and the ranks they held, the first generation of Uganda's prison leadership thus had close ties to the colonial period. Furthermore, the procedures and policies that governed their work had also changed very little. The Prisons Act of 1964—which created an official national prison service—was largely the same as the 1958 Prisons Ordinance.¹⁰ The Penal Code Act of 1950 also remained the basis for Uganda's penal code after independence.¹¹ As a result, colonial conceptions of crime and ideas about how it should be punished carried over into the postcolonial period.

There were also significant ideological continuities. Many of the philosophies behind the late colonial reforms in Uganda carried over, firmly tied to wider global norms of penal welfarism.¹² Again, Uganda was not unique in this regard. The merits and methods of the penal welfare model were disseminated through arenas such as the United Nations Congresses on the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders, which first ran in 1955. These gatherings, which happened every five years, brought together prison staff, government officials, and crime experts from around the world. While representatives from the Global South were included in such forums, there was, as Stanley Cohen argues, a “benign transfer” approach to the dissemination of perspectives on crime and prisons during this period. Organizations such as the United Nations (UN) possessed “little questioning or self-doubt” in regard to the merits of the penal welfare system and approaches to crime in the Global North. Countries in the so-called Third World were encouraged to “satisfy their aspirations for justice, progress, and security by building a scientific crime-control program into their development plans.”¹³ This phenomenon has persisted today through global discourses of prison reform that insist on the importance of applying “‘Northern’ advances in prison rule” to African states.¹⁴ UPS has largely embraced this approach, from the rhetoric of the 1965 Conference for Technical Staff to the current policy of human rights-based prison reform. At many levels, therefore, the colonial legacy looms large in Uganda's prisons.

THE PRODUCTIVE PRISON: FARMING AND INDUSTRIES

In the 1960s and 1970s, Uganda's political leaders and prison administrators sought to link prisons to the nation's economic development. While the economic policies of Obote and Amin differed in many respects, they both actively promoted prison farms and industries. As discussed in chapter 1, the colonial state had significantly expanded UPS's industrial and agricultural capacity in the post–World War II period under the aegis of “development

and welfare.” After independence, this emphasis on the productivity of prisons intensified, now under the mantle of nation building.

This focus on the prison’s economic capacity was not unique to Uganda, as many postcolonial leaders sought to harness the power of prison labor in the service of economic development. At a meeting of African prison officials held in Addis Ababa in 1969, for example, government officials emphasized the “need to relate prison industry and agriculture to national development plans.”¹⁵ In Tanzania, Commissioner of Prisons O. K. Rugimbana asserted the importance of using “every available convicted prisoner” in “nation-building and revenue-earning.”¹⁶ Prison farms also featured in national development strategies in countries such as Nigeria and Sudan.¹⁷ For new states looking to boost their economic growth, prison farms and industries were one way to work towards this goal. While the entanglement between incarceration and capitalism has been repeatedly emphasized in studies focused on the Global North, there is much work that remains to be done to examine such dynamics in the Global South.¹⁸

Initially, the Ugandan state prioritized the expansion of prison farms, a move that reflected the agricultural base of the economy at the time. As was the case across much of the continent, industrial development was not a priority of the colonial state in Uganda, which instead emphasized exportable cash crops such as cotton.¹⁹ Bataringaya discussed the importance of prison farming at the 1965 technical staff conference, linking it to Uganda’s status as “primarily an agricultural country.” “In a developing country such as ours,” he remarked in his speech, “we should aim both at the production of food-stuffs for inmates, revenue to the Government and the training on the job for inmates’ social rehabilitation on discharge.” Farm expansion was also tied to a more romanticized vision of rural development. Echoing colonial-era rhetoric about the pitfalls of urbanization, Bataringaya continued: “We should aim at encouraging offenders to return to the country and earn a living from their piece of land and not to remain in the towns.”²⁰ Obote, in his capacity as prime minister at the time, reinforced this message. While addressing a group of prison officers on another occasion that year, Obote asserted the importance of training “prisoners in the modern methods of agricultural so that after discharge they could return to their homes and earn an honest living,” rather than “running about in urban areas creating artificial employment” where the “danger of lapsing into a life of crime was omnipresent.”²¹ During the Obote I period, therefore, prison farms were not only a vehicle for economic development but also a way to promote a vision of social order based on rural living.

Once Obote became president in 1966, he sought to further expand the productive capacity of prison farms and industries. This was in keeping with

his wider statist economic policy, through which the government promoted the intensification of local production and the nationalization of certain sectors of the economy. Such trends were encapsulated in his “Move to the Left” and declaration of the Common Man’s Charter in 1969.²² Obote celebrated the importance of agriculture as a mainstay of Uganda’s development and sought to move away from cash crops produced for export abroad, therefore marking a departure from colonial policies. He called for “peasant farming technologies and the use of labour,” and, as part of this, he included prison farms in Uganda’s Second Five-Year Plan for development.²³

In keeping with this strategy, the Obote I government oversaw the expansion of prison farms: whereas UPS had five thousand acres worth of prison farmland in 1965, it had seventy thousand acres in 1969—a remarkable fourteenfold increase.²⁴ One of the new farm sites established in this period was Adjumani Prison Farm in the Northern Madi District, which alone had five thousand acres of farmland.²⁵ As part of the farm’s opening, Bataringaya toured the facilities, even posing for a photograph of himself riding a Massey-Ferguson tractor.²⁶ With this expansion, UPS became not only a site of significant agricultural production but also a major landholder. This land was divided into rural farms, urban farms, and pilot schemes in which more intensive farming methods were tested. Photographs of these farms from the 1960s show vast open fields, with prisoners—usually dressed in a uniform of plain short-sleeved tops and shorts—planting and harvesting crops or tending to livestock under the supervision of prison staff.²⁷ Cash crops, particularly cotton, continued to be a mainstay of prison farming, much as in the colonial period. In 1966, for example, more than 75 percent of the total revenue for prison farms came from cotton.²⁸ There was, however, also considerable diversification of crops over the course of the 1960s, which was tied to Obote’s wider economic strategy. The UPS annual report in 1967, for example, listed over fifteen food crops grown on farms—including dietary staples such as millet, maize, sorghum, and groundnuts—as well as livestock, poultry, and fish. That year, eighty dairy cows were purchased for new herds at prisons in Soroti, Fort Portal, Patiko, and Murchison Bay. While their milk was “primarily intended for the benefits of Prison Staff members and their families,” it also aligned with the government’s goal of growing “the production of dairy products everywhere and so reduce Uganda’s dependence on imported supplies.”²⁹ Along with this diversification, the government framed prison farms as educational sites, inviting members of the public for technical demonstrations regarding farming and animal husbandry. The Obote government had thus adapted the prison farming system introduced during the colonial period, aligning the policy with its broader development goals.



FIGURE 2.1. Kiburara Prison Farm, 1960s. Photo album of former commissioner of prisons Fabian Okwaare, personal collection of Henry Lubega.

Prison industries were also expanded in the 1960s, particularly following Obote's takeover of the presidency. While agriculture remained a major priority of the state, the government did begin to push for industrialization in the late 1960s. This was clearly spelled out in the Common Man's Charter, which warned against "an excessive dependence on agriculture" and noted the "limited participation of Ugandans in the modern industrial and commercial sectors of the economy."³⁰ Unsurprisingly, this approach reverberated within the prison system. In 1966, when Obote became president, there were forty industrial workshops within UPS.³¹ Within a year, construction on new workshops at Luzira Upper Prison, Murchison Bay Prison, Jinja Prison, and Mbale Prison had been completed, mainly to support the expansion of tailoring work, which was the foundation of the prison industries.³² Beyond tailoring, prisoners were involved in industries such as carpentry, bookbinding, chain-link fencing production, mat making, and printing.³³ These had been introduced by the British, but production had expanded after independence. According to UPS records for the late 1960s, prison industry revenue increased steadily during the Obote I years, providing the state with additional income. Furthermore, UPS made material contributions to the work of state building, as most of its contracts came from other sectors of government, particularly the Uganda Police, ministries, the military, and local government authorities. Industrial prison labor thus left an imprint on the nation, from the office furniture of

government employees to the buildings they worked in.³⁴ In 1963, for example, UPS prisoners built the Uganda Army Barracks in Moroto.³⁵ The fact that prisoners' labor was used to construct military barracks reflects not only the role of UPS in building state infrastructure but also the continued ways in which Uganda's "coercive trades" remained closely connected after independence.³⁶

As discussed earlier, there was considerable emphasis placed on the training and support of technical staff during this period. Godfrey (pseudonym), a former officer who had instructed prisoners in crafts such as basket making and woodwork, spoke with pride about how UPS had sent him to India and Japan for training in the 1960s.³⁷ Prisoners were also given opportunities to cultivate specialized skills. Through their work, prisoners could earn trade test certificates, which would, in principle, help them to gain employment upon their release and, more importantly in the eyes of the state, contribute to Uganda's economy.³⁸ "The prisoners—especially the urbanized prisoner—must be trained to take his place within the changing industrial face of Uganda," Bataringaya declared in a speech to prison staff in 1970; "modern manufacturing techniques must be taught and he must be conditioned to the discipline and monotony of modern industry."³⁹

Beyond this celebratory rhetoric of the state, however, prisoners often faced grueling labor conditions. In 1963, for example, a group of prisoners at Katojo Government Prison in Fort Portal wrote to the minister of internal affairs to complain about their treatment. Their letter represents one of the few instances in the archival record where convicted prisoners' voices are visible. It provides a glimpse into some of the difficulties associated with prison labor, and it is thus worth quoting at length:

The prisoners are made to work extra hours, which is quite contrary to the laid-down regulations governing all Central Government Prisons in Uganda. Prisoners here, begin their daily routine work at 7.00am and some do not return to prison until 3.00pm for each prisoner is given an area of about 150 sq. Yds., for first clearing and then digging to a depth of 1 ½ feet! And as it is the law of nature, that all people are not equally strong, some have to be kept working, until the said area is completed at 3.00pm without any drinking water to quench their thirst, and through very heavy rains, unsheltered and severe beatings with truncheons, failure to finish the given part, or complaining of the hardships and torture results in being confined to Cell Punishment.⁴⁰

In this letter, the prisoners foregrounded their expectations regarding proper working conditions as well as their knowledge of wider regulations,

demanding accountability from the state. Along with their concerns about labor conditions, the prisoners also complained about the many other hardships of prison life. Their grievances included their “intolerable” and “unbearable” officer in charge, who they claimed was involved with “torturing” and “insulting” them; food that was not “fit for human consumption” and would not be eaten by a “poor-man’s dog”; the lack of special medical diets for prisoners who required them; and the absence of proper medical treatment.⁴¹ While such issues do not permeate state media—or, in most cases, archival materials—it is important to acknowledge the glaring disjuncture between the prison as envisioned by the state and the prison experienced by those behind bars. Productivity and progress were useful mantras for the government, but they came at a high cost to the prisoners forced to do the work.

Conditions were similarly bad, if not worse, for those incarcerated in district prisons, especially as these were not as closely regulated as UPS sites. Prisoners were regularly made to work outside of the prison grounds, either hired out to organizations or covertly used by warders or local government officials.⁴² The state often tried to crack down on these practices, primarily because this compromised the ability of district prisons to be “self-supporting.”⁴³ In 1969, for example, the Minister of Regional Administration’s Office ordered that district administrators stop using prison labor to plant banana trees along the roads, something that was done to welcome important visitors to the area. The Minister’s Office noted that this work was done without pay and led to prison farms being “brought to a standstill.” Consequently, the office explained, “many prison farm units are not able to grow sufficient food etc. resulting in their being a financial burden to the District Administrations.”⁴⁴ For prisoners, this meant that they not only had to work on prison farms but also had to work privately in conditions where opportunities for exploitation were widespread given the lack of oversight or regulation.

Many of these trends continued once Amin became president in 1971. In the first few months of his presidency, Amin and his officials regularly spoke publicly about the importance of prison farms and industries. In March, for example, Amin presided over the opening of a jute bag factory in Tororo, for which UPS was meant to produce the raw material. “The Prisons Department,” he exclaimed, “will show a very good example as to what can be achieved by working with our hands,” and he noted that the production of jute would result in “saving a great deal of foreign exchange.”⁴⁵ Perhaps in recognition of UPS’s economic output during the 1960s, Amin appointed Fabian Okwaare—the first Ugandan to hold the position of commissioner of prisons and one of the key architects of the farm and industrial expansion

within UPS—as the minister of agriculture, forestry, and cooperatives during the first year of his presidency. Amin thanked Okwaare for the “high standard he had attained for the Prisons Service,” noting that he had “contributed greatly to the development of the country.”⁴⁶ Okwaare’s successor, Leonard Kigonya, emphasized the importance of building upon Okwaare’s contributions, calling on UPS to “triple farm output” and “establish giant industries.”⁴⁷

Amin’s approach to prison farms and industries also took on some new dimensions, however, particularly due to his “economic war.” Launched in 1972, this shift in state policy led to the expulsion of Uganda’s racialized “Asian” population.⁴⁸ On August 9, 1972, Amin abruptly announced that his government would “cancel every entry permit and certificate of residency for any person who is of Asian origin, extraction, or descent.”⁴⁹ As a result, over fifty-five thousand Ugandan Asians were forced to leave the country they called home.⁵⁰ Many would never return. Hassan Hirji, whose family had first come to Uganda in the 1930s on British passports, was among those who had to leave.⁵¹ Hassan was born in Uganda and had grown up in Mpigi District, where his family ran a shop.⁵² His family, like many others, “became stateless” following the expulsion order and went to Canada as refugees in October of 1972.⁵³

Overall, the economic war had a detrimental impact on Uganda’s economy, but certain individuals and institutions benefited from this policy. Following the expulsion, the government set up the “Departed Asians Property Custodian Board” to reallocate the businesses of those who had been expelled.⁵⁴ Many of the beneficiaries were the wives of military men, resulting in what Alicia Decker characterizes as an “accidental liberation” for some Ugandan women.⁵⁵ UPS also benefited, acquiring metal workshops in Jinja, carpentry sites in Kampala and Mbale, a meatpacking factory in Soroti, tailoring workshops in Kampala, and the Kampala-based D. L. Printing Press.⁵⁶ Luke (pseudonym), a senior prison officer who was sent to oversee the meatpacking factory in Soroti, spoke animatedly about his experience. “Running the factory was exciting,” he recalled. According to Luke, there were three hundred prisoners working in the factory, and the main purpose of their production was to prepare canned beef for the army. The use of this free prisoners’ labor, he remarked, was “not accepted internationally” at the time, but was used because it “cut the cost of running the factory.”⁵⁷ Through the official media, Amin emphasized how the decision to give UPS these businesses had been due to his “directive,” which he claimed would “provide more training facilities for the inmates and make [the] prison department productive.”⁵⁸ Following these acquisitions, UPS reported an increase

in revenue of 22 percent.⁵⁹ Information about prison revenue, however, was reported inconsistently in this period and is thus difficult to corroborate. What is clear, however, is that the state wanted to emphasize the ongoing contributions of prison farms and industries to Uganda's economy.

The benefits of this reallocation, however, were limited, as the wider devastation wrought by the economic war impacted UPS on many levels. At an institutional level, there was very little discussion of these negative effects, aside from mentions of "financial stringency."⁶⁰ In contrast to the evasiveness of official documents, Matthew (pseudonym) spoke candidly about the struggles of this period. Matthew had joined UPS in 1969 as a warder and thus had been working for a few years before the economic war was launched. "When he [Amin] expelled the Asians," he remarked, "things started becoming worse. . . . For example, the roads started getting spoiled, no maintenance. Commodities started getting lost. Goods, essentials, started getting expensive." For Matthew and many of his colleagues, they faced financial stress as a result. "We also live like any other human being," he continued. "If sugar was costing like 1000 [shillings] and it went to 2000 [shillings], I'm affected, because our earnings, our wages, even if you increase the salary, still you will be affected . . . you find you cannot manage, you cannot afford."⁶¹ Prison staff thus experienced significant financial hardship. Some officers appear to have relied on products from prison farms to supplement their income: during the 1970s, there were reports of prison officers renting out land to the public and selling crops from the farms.⁶² Although not as visible in the archive, prisoners and their families would have also felt the strain of the economic war, exacerbating difficult conditions for those already dealing with the financial losses that resulted from being incarcerated.

Despite these issues, however, UPS supported the economic war, which was communicated through the state media. In June of 1974, for example, the *Voice of Uganda* reported on the visit of Lieutenant Colonel Onaah, governor of the Eastern Province, with prison staff in Mbale, through which he urged them to maintain their standards of industriousness, as this was the "best way to boost the national economy and fight the economic war effectively."⁶³ UPS also showed its endorsement of the war by awarding Amin its most prestigious medal in February 1975, recognizing his "bravery and wise leadership" when it came to putting "the economy of the country into the hands of Ugandans."⁶⁴ Both of these stories were on the front page of the *Voice of Uganda*, demonstrating their importance to the state. The official media thus played a key role in promoting a positive image of the economic war and the prison service's commitment to it.

Amin also linked prisons to his policy of “self-reliance.” A rather vague philosophy that had first been discussed during the 1960s, it centered on the transfer of economic capabilities from foreign to Ugandan hands, thus following on loosely from Obote’s “Move to the Left.” Amin emphasized the role of UPS in attaining self-reliance in official visits to prisons. This is well illustrated by his visit to the Training School library in November 1974. Speaking to prison officers, Amin urged them to acquire copies of his speeches on “self-reliance,” as well as books that promoted “Uganda’s culture, modern methods of farming and obedience to leaders.” He also demanded a culling of books that “cannot help the advancement of Uganda,” including one that outlined the *ujamaa* system in Tanzania. Amin expressed his displeasure at the presence of this book, commenting that it had “no bearing at all on what Uganda was trying to pursue in order to achieve development.”⁶⁵

Like the economic war, UPS actively promoted Amin’s discourse of “self-reliance.” In 1976, for example, steps were underway to launch a “self-help” poultry project at Kirinya in Jinja, the second-largest prison complex in the country. The project was, according to correspondence between senior officers, designed to “train prisoners in building using purely local materials” in keeping with the wider goal of self-reliance.⁶⁶ At a broader level, Amin’s ideas about development permeated UPS interactions with other branches of government. This can be seen clearly in a letter between the commissioner of prisons and the office of the newly created North Busoga

FIGURE 2.2. Kirinya Prison complex, Jinja, 1960s. Photo album of former commissioner of prisons Fabian Okwaare, personal collection of Henry Lubega.



District in 1974. In his letter, the North Busoga representative wrote, “North Busoga District being one of the new District[s], requires more attention on the side of development. In view of the fact that Uganda needs supersonic speed of development in all fields, as civil servants we feel duty bound to uplift the status of this District to the level of other old Districts.” Imploring the commissioner to send the Prisons Band for a district fundraiser, he continued, “Therefore, taking into account the fact that all Ministries and Departments work for one objective, that is the development of Uganda [we] would like to request you to use your good offices to secure the release of your Prison Band.”⁶⁷ For this new district, working with UPS provided a way to demonstrate their commitment to progress and “supersonic” economic development.

Throughout the 1970s, UPS continued to promote prison labor. The 1975 Annual Report for UPS extolled the benefits of this physical labor for prisoners, noting that it “hardens their muscles” and ensures that they are “inculcated with attitudes and work habits” that they could use upon their release. More strategically, working prisoners to exhaustion also contributed to the maintenance of control within prison sites, a reality that UPS did not try to hide. In the 1975 report, labor was characterized as a “basic aid in syphoning away pent-up energies which could otherwise be easily used for plots, unrest, tensions, and even rioting.”⁶⁸ Labor was thus not linked only to development but also to the maintenance of order and security within the prison.

As was the case in the 1960s, the state’s emphasis on prison labor and productivity often translated into intensive work schedules and difficult conditions for prisoners on a day-to-day basis. “By design, the prison was not a holiday,” Luke commented.⁶⁹ For prisoners in the 1970s, hard labor remained a central feature of their day-to-day lives. Convicted prisoners worked in factories, workshops, out in the fields, and on building sites. At Moroto Government Prison, for example, a population of approximately two hundred prisoners reportedly cultivated over 220 acres of food crops and cotton, cared for eight hundred chickens, and engaged in carpentry, tailoring, and shoemaking in 1971.⁷⁰ In Jinja, prisoners assigned to build the new Remand Prison had to prepare a “steep hill” for construction, which required a “considerable amount of time and labor” for “excavating and leveling the rocky soil.”⁷¹ Often, this work was relentless. In Bugisu District, members of the community complained about how prisoners were being forced to work on public holidays.⁷² As in the 1960s, prisoners in district prisons were also frequently sent to work in private homes, a practice for which the legal boundaries were often blurry. In the 1976 Annual Report on Prison

Farms in Busoga District, for example, the “general misuse of prison labor” was flagged as a key issue, particularly in regard to prisoners being hired out “to outsiders.”⁷³ In response, the Ministry of Public Service and Local Administrations announced that “no prison labor force should be hired out to private individuals or private organizations.” Justifying the decision, the ministry cited “penological principles” and “international conventions and practices,” referring specifically to the ILO Convention No. 29. Once again, however, the issue of self-sufficiency was an overriding concern, with the ministry arguing that the misuse of labor “deprives the prison institutions of the labor force which should be usefully employed at the prison industries, farms or any other establishments.”⁷⁴

Along with this focus on industrial and agricultural production, Amin also saw prisoners as a labor force that could be harnessed for noneconomic purposes. This was most apparent in his campaign to “keep Uganda clean.” Ostensibly an urban renewal policy, it was used as a cover for more repressive agendas.⁷⁵ The regime, however, presented the campaign as an urgent collective and patriotic effort to keep Uganda’s cities clean. City dwellers were encouraged, and often forced, to participate in massive cleanup operations.⁷⁶ Unsurprisingly, the state saw prisoners as a readily available labor force. This was concretely spelled out in a letter from the district commissioner of South Kigezi to the officer in charge (OC) of Ndorwa Government Prison in October 1978. In anticipation of the arrival of foreign delegates who were attending Uganda’s sixteenth independence anniversary celebrations, Amin ordered that a group of prisoners clean up the White Horse Inn, Lake Bunyonyi Hotel, and the local hospital. It was expected, the district commissioner wrote, that this directive would be implemented “without delay.”⁷⁷ At a more day-to-day level, prison staff were expected to uphold the new standards of cleanliness. In a letter entitled “General Cleanliness at Hoima Central Prison,” the OC warned the staff that inspections of their quarters and the wider prison site would henceforth be happening “at any time.” He demanded that they “put vigour on this procedure of cleanliness so that we may see that we are matching . . . the appeal which was made of [*sic*] to ‘KEEP UGANDA CLEAN.’”⁷⁸ Prisoners’ labor was thus exploited by the state in pursuit of multiple political agendas.

THE PRISON AND THE PUBLIC

As part of their efforts to fully benefit from the symbolic power of the prison, Ugandan officials ensured that messaging about the productivity and professionalism of UPS reached a wide audience. This was achieved in three ways: through major public events, regular official visits to prisons, and

extensive coverage of these events in the official media. During these decades, the state carefully managed public perceptions of the prison, seeking to associate it with some of the key aspirations and values of the new nation, including freedom, economic development, and unity. While such symbolism was profoundly undercut by the realities of the state's violent use of incarceration, analyzing these discursive strategies and public performances demonstrates how Uganda's leaders sought to harness the imaginative capital of the prison for political purposes. Although the power of the prison was premised on its invisibility, with prisoners and prison operations being deliberately hidden from public view, Uganda's leaders made aspects of UPS selectively visible to try and bolster their power and legitimacy.

Before discussing the events themselves, it is important to reflect briefly on the significant role that the state media played in portraying these events to a public audience. Beginning in the late colonial period, the official media became an important way for the government to try to "exert control over public life."⁷⁹ After independence, this trend continued, with the government using the media to portray itself in a favorable light. In any given year, stories about prisons appeared regularly on the pages of the *Uganda Argus*, which was the official paper of the Obote I regime, and the *Voice of Uganda*, which replaced it in the Amin years. While some focused on specific prisoners and their crimes, many emphasized UPS's contribution to nation building, focusing on prison farms and industries as well as its role in reforming "deviant" citizens. The Uganda Broadcasting Corporation also included prisons in their coverage, and Radio Uganda played a role in spreading stories about prisons and publicizing UPS recruitment opportunities. Through these outlets, Uganda's leaders carefully cultivated an image of UPS as a positive and productive part of the nation.

During the 1960s and 1970s, UPS was often involved in major public events and ceremonies of national significance. Through these events, which always featured prominently in the official media, UPS was presented as a symbol of national unity. For example, UPS participated in the first ever "National Day" in July of 1965, taking part in a salute of President Mutesa.⁸⁰ Independence Day anniversaries were another important celebratory occasion. In 1968, UPS entered ten floats into the parade marking the sixth anniversary of independence, all of which were built in prison workshops.⁸¹ These may indeed be some of the floats pictured in the photo album of Fabian Okwaare, the commissioner of prisons. The photo shows several UPS floats—representing prison industries and the UPS Riot Squad—participating in a parade in front of a large crowd, carrying signs with slogans such as "security is our duty" and "work for progress."



FIGURE 2.3. UPS takes part in parade, float, 1960s. Photo album of former commissioner of prisons, Fabian Okwaare, personal collection of Henry Lubega.

UPS was also involved in internationally focused events. This included the visits of foreign dignitaries, such as when one hundred prison recruits participated in a ceremonial guard of honor for Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia.⁸² Products from UPS farms and workshops were also showcased to international audiences, such as during the 1967 Commonwealth Parliamentary Congress conference, which was hosted by Uganda. Delegates were invited to visit Patiko Prison Farm in northern Uganda and were reportedly “very impressed at the excellent condition of the mixed farm and the obvious training which it afforded to inmates.”⁸³ Each delegate received gifts that had been manufactured in prison workshops, and UPS made the flags that were used to decorate Kampala during the conference.⁸⁴ A similar scene played out in 1975, when Uganda hosted the annual summit of the Organization of African Unity. The summit was an important opportunity for Amin: facing mounting criticism at home and abroad for human rights abuses, he was eager to show off his government’s progress to his regional counterparts. One of the key features of the summit was the “Uganda Today” show in Jinja, which involved an exhibition of industries, products, and services. The *Voice of Uganda* extolled the prowess of UPS, arguing that its exhibit “proved to the visitors that it was not confining people in prisons in order to suffer, but to make them good citizens and self-reliant.”⁸⁵ By showcasing UPS’s products to international audiences, Ugandan officials sought to demonstrate their progress in industrial and agricultural output

since colonial rule, as well as undermine criticisms about prisons. Such efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, as the brutality of the Amin regime had become undeniable, but they demonstrate how the state continued its attempt to portray prisons in a positive way.

The productivity of prisons was also emphasized through local events. UPS regularly participated in district shows around the country, displaying the agricultural and industrial goods produced on prison sites. It also hosted its own shows, which were designed to demonstrate “wide range, high standard and versatility of the Prisons Industries and Handicrafts.”⁸⁶ Photos of these events reveal crowds of government officials and members of the public chatting with prison staff as they stroll past fenced-off areas featuring UPS’s livestock.⁸⁷ During the 1970s, the government sought to set up sites for the public to learn about and purchase UPS products. In 1975, the OC of Ndoorwa Prison inquired about the acquisition of a “Show Room” in the southwestern town of Kabale, so that UPS could sell products such as furniture.⁸⁸ In such forums, UPS was thus presented as an important resource for the nation.

One of the most significant public arenas in this period were the clemency ceremonies honoring the release of prisoners and detainees.⁸⁹ Initiated with the independence amnesty mentioned at the outset of this book, there were nearly twenty such events in the 1960s and 1970s, which led to the early release of over ten thousand individuals.⁹⁰ While the accuracy of these figures is questionable—as there is evidence to suggest that some releases were for propaganda purposes—mass prisoner releases were still a significant phenomenon in Ugandan public life in this period. The releases occurred on a variety of occasions, including Independence Day anniversaries, the aftermath of coups, and holidays. While political detainees were often the focus of these releases, convicted prisoners were also freed at times. Many of these events were attended by crowds of thousands and were widely publicized through official media, regularly appearing on the front pages, as well as receiving coverage in the foreign press. The release of prisoners became an important political ritual, used to signal the state’s commitment to freedom while simultaneously reinforcing its control over it.

This phenomenon had roots in the colonial period and was also widely used in other postcolonial states on the continent at this time. As was the case across the empire, the British had introduced legislation into Uganda based on the royal prerogative of mercy in England, which dated back to the medieval period.⁹¹ After independence, the “prerogative of mercy” appeared as an article in Uganda’s constitution, giving the executive the power to grant prisoners a “pardon,” a remission on their sentences, a

substitution of one form of punishment for a less severe one, or a “respite”—often indefinite—from their punishment. The release of prisoners was one significant outcome of this prerogative. Similar legislation existed—and was regularly used—in other postcolonial states.⁹² At the regional preparatory meeting for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in Addis Ababa in 1978, delegates commented upon the misuse of this practice. “De-institutionalization of corrections” they argued, “should not be left to chance. Prisons could not be emptied by the exercise of the pardon power on national holidays.”⁹³ In Uganda and elsewhere, however, such acts were not tied to “de-institutionalization” or decarceration agendas; they were strategic political performances.

Having been involved in the independence celebration releases in 1962, Obote had witnessed the symbolic power of clemency measures firsthand. He expanded the use of this mechanism during his presidency. This marked a departure from the colonial period, where the early release of prisoners appears only twice in the archival record: in 1925, in honor of the Duke of York’s visit, and in 1955, when Buganda Kingdom released prisoners to mark the kabaka’s return from exile.⁹⁴ Obote’s government first released prisoners in July of 1967, more than a year after he had seized executive power. On July 15, the government announced the release of 123 Baganda detainees who had been incarcerated under emergency legislation.⁹⁵ In the press, this release was framed as a vehicle for the easing of tensions between the government and the Baganda community, which, as mentioned earlier, had deteriorated following the abolition of the kingdoms and the attack on Mengo Palace. The main article on the release in the *Uganda Argus* described how “scores of relatives and friends were at the prison gates as the detainees came out” and emphasized the “jubilation as people met up with their families again.” Turning to the wider political dynamics between the Baganda and the government, the article closed by emphasizing that the “general reaction” to the release was “that progress had been made in restoring emergency conditions to normal in Buganda, and that the end of the emergency was in sight.”⁹⁶ This coverage—and the release itself—was thus carefully calculated by the Obote regime, designed to improve relationships that had been damaged due to state repression.

Soon after, the Obote government announced a much greater release of prisoners on July 22, 1967, which it termed “Freedom Day.” A total of 2,954 prisoners were let go, all of whom had been sentenced for criminal offenses.⁹⁷ As is often the case with clemency measures, this affected those prisoners who were viewed as nonthreatening to the government, including those who had violated traffic ordinances and local bylaws; those who were

chronically ill, “crippled,” or displayed “advanced senility”; and long-term prisoners who were due for release within six months. There were clear lines of exclusion drawn: “habitual criminals”; those serving sentences for “offences against the public order”; and those convicted of robbery, assault against police or prison officers, or arson were not included. Along with these demarcations, Obote’s government also emphasized the personalized nature of the releases. As reported by the *Argus*, Obote “directed” prison staff to “make it abundantly clear” to the released prisoners that “the President himself has considered each particular prisoner’s case individually.” In this way, Obote sought both to emphasize his own magnanimity and reinforce his power. Finally, Obote used the opportunity to exhort the ex-prisoners to be good citizens and participate in nation building. He urged them to “lead honourable, trouble-free lives” and “refrain from doing anything that may be against the interest of society.”⁹⁸ To an extent, this echoed his nation-building rhetoric at the independence ceremony in 1962, but it also had a more threatening tone, reminding those freed that they could return to prison should they act “against the interest of society”—a vague phrase defined on the government’s terms.

When Amin came to power, he too turned to clemency ceremonies to boost his image. As chapter 4 discusses, Amin initially focused on freeing Obote’s political detainees. During Amin’s first year in power, he enacted almost as many prisoner releases as had occurred during the Obote I presidency. From January 1971 to January 1972, there were reports of seven major ceremonies honoring the release of prisoners. Nearly all these events took place in high-profile public spaces in Kampala and were prominently featured in the official press. They took a variety of forms—including the release of individual prisoners, group releases, and generalized celebrations—and occurred in a range of venues, from stadiums to places of worship.

The official media, much like in the Obote years, portrayed these releases as a symbol of the state’s commitment to freedom. When Amin’s government announced the release of three thousand prisoners to mark the first anniversary of the coup, for example, the *Argus* was filled with praise for this decision, calling it an “unprecedented gesture of supreme magnanimity.”⁹⁹ Stories in the paper included descriptions of “jubilant relatives” who met the former prisoners as they “walked out of the prison to breathe the air of freedom” and noted that the newly released individuals expressed their “sincere appreciation” to Amin and “pledged” their loyalty to him.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, an op-ed author in the *Argus* wrote that “there has not been any stronger action that could have been more effective in showing these people very poignantly that they can trust the humanity of their government,

than this one.”¹⁰¹ Prisoner releases and their media coverage were thus an important arena through which the state sought to signal its benevolence and legitimacy.

Finally, prisons were also in the public eye through official visits to UPS, which were also closely covered in the media. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Ugandan government officials, including Obote and Amin, regularly appeared at UPS prisons to honor the passing out of new recruits or to celebrate the opening of new facilities. These occasions provided officials with an important platform through which to discursively link UPS to nation-building agendas, reminding the public of the role of prisons in producing law-abiding and productive citizens. In September 1963, for example, Minister of Internal Affairs Felix Onama attended the passing-out ceremony of prison recruits. In his speech to the new recruits, Onama proclaimed, “The days of prison officers being simply guards or ‘turn-keys’ are over.” Instead, prisons personnel were “expected to guide and encourage the prisoners, and by personal example lead them to respect authority and learn the pleasure and pride to be gained from their own efforts,” thereby ensuring that prisoners were able to “become better citizens on their release.”¹⁰²

Obote delivered a similar message at another passing-out ceremony a year later. On the morning of September 14, 1964, Obote visited the grounds of the Prisons Training School to witness the ceremony for the latest cohort of prison officers. Despite the pouring rain, 138 officers paraded in front of him for inspection, marching with a precision honed over months of instruction. Arranging themselves into neat lines, they stood tall and motionless with rifles at their sides. Flanked on either side by senior officers, Obote walked past each recruit in turn. With his sleek suit, wristwatch, and elegant cane, the prime minister stood out among the sea of uniforms, marking his role as a civilian authority. In Obote’s estimation, it was the largest group of senior and junior officers to have passed out of the Prisons Training School and was thus a historic occasion. Addressing the new officers, Obote implored them to hold themselves to the highest personal and professional standards as they embarked on their careers. He reminded the officers of the value of their work, as they were “assisting not only in the rehabilitation of prisoners, but also your Government and country in halting the advance of crime.”¹⁰³

Miriam Obote also visited UPS in an official capacity. In July of 1964, for example, Mrs. Obote presided over the opening ceremony of the hostel for prison wardresses at the Prisons Training School. In her speech, she too emphasized the prison officers’ important contribution to the nation. “My husband and I, and indeed the Uganda Government, appreciate your expression of determination to make a success of your task which will be

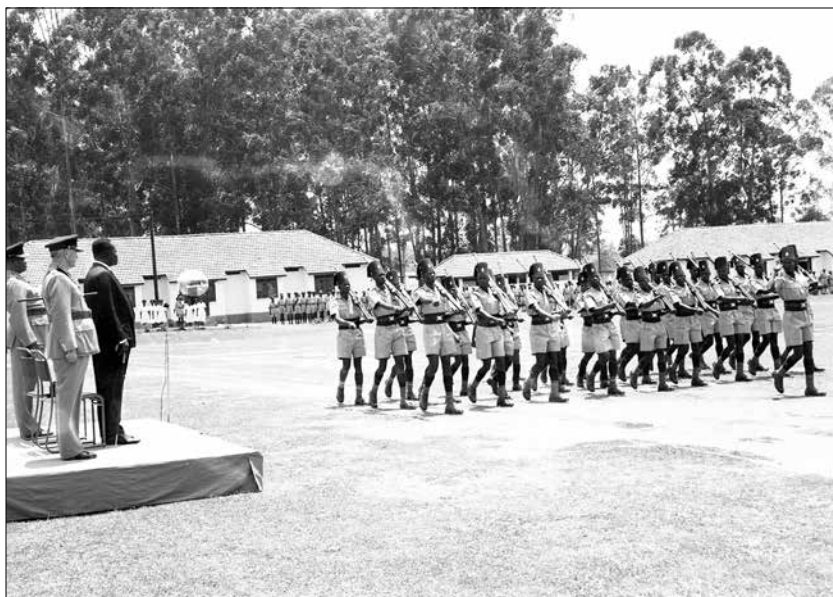


FIGURE 2.4. Minister Felix Onama at passing-out ceremony, 1963. Uganda Broadcasting Corporation.



FIGURE 2.5. Milton Obote at passing-out ceremony, 1964. Uganda Broadcasting Corporation.

of immense value to the less fortunate of our womenfolk.” She urged the female officers to be “of the highest possible calibre” in both their “character and training.”¹⁰⁴ Press coverage of the event stressed the gratitude of the wardresses. Miss Mukasa was quoted as saying that Mrs. Obote’s visit “has made us realise that we are indeed considered important and equal to men in the service.” UPS was thus framed as a place where both women and men could engage in nation building.

Such messages became a regular refrain throughout the 1960s and carried over into the 1970s. In his inaugural visit to Luzira in March 1971, Amin attended the passing-out ceremony of 240 staff. This was the first group of recruits to graduate under the government of the Second Republic, and thus it was imbued with special significance. In his speech, Amin emphasized two key themes: the “modern” orientation of the Prisons Service and the importance of moral behavior among the prison staff. Amin emphasized the broader significance of their work, stating that they were “responsible not only for the secure confinement of inmates, but also for their reformation, correction and return to society as better citizens.”¹⁰⁵ At another passing-out ceremony in 1972, minister of internal affairs Lieutenant Colonel Obitre Gama praised UPS’s high standards and diversity, remarking that the staff had been selected from different ethnic groups across the country. He also stressed the importance of upholding high standards, emphasizing that his ministry wanted to “maintain the country’s reputation as one of those developing countries whose penal systems have been acknowledged

FIGURE 2.6. Amin addresses prison officers, 1974. Uganda Broadcasting Corporation.



internationally.”¹⁰⁶ Amin also delivered a speech, evoking a sense of a social contract between prison officers and the public. “A tax-payer who has sponsored you on this course expects much from you,” he commented. “And in return, you must give them assistance, show them a spirit of tolerance, courtesy and patience; be of good conduct and behaviour whenever you are dealing with them.” He cautioned them against corruption and political motives, remarking that these were the “worst diseases” in Uganda.¹⁰⁷ As is discussed in the next section and chapter 3, government officials thus expected prison staff to embody national unity.

BUILDING A NATIONAL SERVICE

Along with nation-building rhetoric and messaging through the media and public events, Ugandan officials also sought to make prisons a truly national system. A key part of this was a shift in the recruitment strategy. As discussed in chapter 1, colonial officials had prioritized recruits from northern Uganda. In contrast, government officials in 1960s emphasized the importance of recruiting from across the country. Beginning in 1964, recruitment “safaris” took place on at least an annual basis and were carried out by senior officers who traveled around the country to meet and interview potential recruits.¹⁰⁸ Advance notice was sent from Prisons Headquarters to senior officers around the country, encouraging them to “give wide publicity” to the upcoming safari and asking them to circulate the news to district commissioners, local administrators, and chiefs. As one such notice explained, “Although there will be several announcements in Radio Uganda and the Press, this method alone is not considered sufficient enough for publicity, as in some cases applicants may be living in distant areas from the towns and may therefore have no access whatsoever to the newspapers or may have no radios.”¹⁰⁹ In trying to extend their reach to remote areas of the country, UPS was deliberate in its attempts to recruit a diverse applicant pool, therefore breaking with earlier colonial policies and “martial race” theories. Additionally, only Ugandans were eligible for recruitment.¹¹⁰ This represented another key shift from the colonial years, when noncitizens (mainly of British origin) could hold positions.

Through recruitment, UPS could share its vision of an ideal public servant, one who could contribute to the prosperity and progress of the new nation. This is evident in the pamphlet entitled *Choose Your Career: The Prisons Service*, published by the Ministry of Education in 1966.¹¹¹ The pamphlet’s contents informed potential recruits of the behavior needed for success, with “discipline,” “industry,” “robust,” and “character” among the list of desirable attributes. Images of industrial workshops, sleek machines, and



FIGURE 2.7. Passing-out parade, Jinja, 1975. Uganda Broadcasting Corporation.

agricultural equipment were also included in an attempt to demonstrate the modernity of UPS and its commitment to rehabilitating prisoners. Other photographs focused specifically on prison officers, providing particularly stylized portrayals of the ideal employee. In one photo, for example, male recruits stand at attention in their hostel, while a senior prison officer demonstrates the features of a properly made bed—an image that recalls UPS’s colonial military history. Another photo shows a prison officer watching over a prisoner working with a printing machine, emphasizing the role that officers played in rehabilitation. The final photo in the pamphlet focuses on female officers chatting in their recently opened hostel, thus locating them in a much more domesticated frame of reference. The women sit in a bright room, enjoying a meal on a table laid with a fresh tablecloth and a vase of flowers. A framed portrait of Obote rests on a television placed next to the eating area, reminding the officers of their duty to the nation while also demonstrating the leisure opportunities available to UPS staff. In these carefully composed photos, prison officers appear as disciplined members of a community of shared values.

Another way to enhance the national nature of UPS was through the policies governing officers’ postings. Once officers had completed their training, they could be required to work at any prison in the country and could expect to be transferred regularly. As they circulated throughout the nation, prison officers experienced different communities within Uganda.

Looking back, some retired officers praised this policy. “It makes you learn to stay with other people who are not of your culture. Or of your tribe,” commented Benjamin (pseudonym), who was recruited in the 1960s. “You become friends and you learn each other’s behavior. . . . It is a very good thing,” he continued.¹¹² As is discussed in chapter 3, however, this approach was not welcomed by all prison staff, as it resulted in considerable personal challenges such as distance from loved ones. This was further exacerbated by the fact that officers generally were not allowed to be posted in their home communities due to concerns about bias. As Isaac (pseudonym), who had joined UPS in the 1960s, explained: “They don’t allow you to work in your home area, because the prisoners that are coming to prisons, some may be your relatives.”¹¹³ Consequently, many officers’ careers were also characterized by a great degree of physical mobility.

Along with these recruitment and transfer policies, there were also structural changes. Obote and Amin created a more centralized prison system, moving away from the tripartite structure that had been a product of indirect rule. Initially, all three services—UPS, the Buganda Kingdom prisons, and the local government prisons—continued to operate after independence. This changed once Obote became president, however, as the Buganda Kingdom Prisons Service ceased to exist following Obote’s abolishment of the kingdoms. The shutting down of Buganda’s prisons was a by-product of Obote’s policy, rather than the main focus, but it did have important effects. UPS took over some of the larger prisons, particularly farms, while the remaining smaller sites became part of the local government prison system.¹¹⁴ Samuel (pseudonym), who worked in Buganda’s prisons at this time, spoke angrily about this process. “The work started not going on smoothly after the government of Obote overthrew Kabaka,” he said. He looked disparagingly upon the local government prisons, arguing that they did not have “sufficient” resources to run the prisons properly and suggesting that the staff were not well trained compared to the personnel in the Buganda government prisons.¹¹⁵

In contrast, local government prisons—which came to be known as “district administration prisons” after independence—remained intact throughout the Obote I period. On March 15, 1977, however, Amin announced that UPS would absorb all district prisons. Like so many of his pronouncements, this decision was made without warning and took immediate effect. Details of the policy were shared with provincial prison authorities on March 28 through a memorandum informing them that “all district administration prisons formerly under the administration of the Ministry of Provincial Administrations” had officially ceased to exist. The process was very decentralized, with

the provincial commissioners told that they had “full powers” to transfer any prisoner or junior and civilian staff member within their province without going through the office of the commissioner of prisons.¹¹⁶ This policy caused considerable confusion among government officials. Writing to the commissioner of prisons in May 1977, V. B. Ssekkono, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Provincial Administrations, expressed his office’s desire to “discuss in detail how best to integrate the Local Administration Prison Service into the Uganda Government Prison Service,” as well as the “financial implications of the exercise.” He closed his letter by noting, “We are anxiously looking forward for [*sic*] such a meeting.”¹¹⁷ Similar uncertainty was apparent among the prison staff. C. E. Kabale, the principal agricultural assistant for prison farms in Busoga, wrote a letter to his superiors seeking clarification: “Now that they are being taken over I would wish to know what my position will be and also that of the staff [I] am working with,” he remarked.¹¹⁸

While seemingly an attempt to create a more national prison service, there is still much mystery regarding the reasons for the merger. Former prison officers who were interviewed remember this process, but few could give definite answers as to why it was initiated. Some suggested it was in response to the ongoing problems within these district prisons, including bad conditions for both the staff and the inmates. Stella (pseudonym), who worked in district prison at the time, argued that the central government “wanted to uplift the standard of prisons.”¹¹⁹ Moses, a current prison officer, had a similar view, commenting, “I think it was to make it easier for the management, because in local government prisons, there was a lot of excesses of human rights [abuses], they almost belonged to nobody, there were no career prisons officers, there were no trained officers managing, they would get their local people to manage those prisons.”¹²⁰

Certainly, there were many criticisms of these prisons within official circles, whether at the time or in retrospect. Jacob (pseudonym), a former magistrate, described district prisons as places of abuse removed from government oversight. “Inside there they had their own rules,” he remarked, listing off a range of punishments which included “caning,” being forced to consume hot peppers or urine, and being “kicked” by askaris.¹²¹ Complaints also surfaced from the prison staff. In 1970, for example, a group of askaris in Tooro wrote to district government officials about their concerns. “We Askaries of nowadays we are really finding difficulties,” they remarked, citing their “little” salary as the primary cause. The money they received, they argued, could not “even help us to put our children in schools, and hardly help our family home.” The askaris begged the government to change the situation: “We are handing our reasons to you to see to it that our Government

is trying hard to welcome our matters, because here in Tooro we are dying.”¹²² Stella also raised similar complaints. Following in the footsteps of her mother, who also worked as a prison officer, Stella had joined the local government prison service in the middle of the Amin years. Although she praised the “goodness of the department,” Stella complained about the poor housing and the low salary, which made it difficult to care for her children, particularly as her husband had died.¹²³ Reflecting on this experience, her son David commented, “The life we went through was not all that good, you know your father has passed away, mother is getting a meagre income, so you have to struggle.”¹²⁴ Looking back at this difficult period, Stella was proud of how she managed to provide for her children despite the challenges her family faced. “I satisfied all of them,” she commented, “and they could wonder now . . . ‘Mama, how did you do to make us stand as we are?’ And I could say it was my head. I could get small salary but I could use it.”¹²⁵ Stella’s story speaks to the difficulties faced by local government prison staff, who received lower salaries and fewer benefits than their counterparts in UPS.

Many UPS officers were also critical of local government prisons, seeking to draw a clear line between their service, which they saw as modern and professional, and local government institutions, which they characterized as informal and corrupt. Such boundary-making processes had a clear self-serving element, with local prisons providing a convenient foil for UPS officers seeking to position their work in a positive light. Former commissioner of prisons Joseph Etima emphasized the plight of prisoners within these institutions: “The treatment of prisoners was different in there. Prisoners were suffering.”¹²⁶ There were also criticisms of the askaris, who, despite some efforts by various regimes to open up training opportunities, went through a much less rigorous process than UPS officers. As Isaac remarked, “They would just recruit anybody and put him there, educated or uneducated, as long as he’s able to lock and open the prison.”¹²⁷ Such views were not only held by individual officers but were also reinforced institutionally. This was particularly evident in the government’s insistence on maintaining distinct uniforms for UPS. In 1973, the Ministry of Public Service and Local Administration sent out a message on this issue, insisting that “the Uganda Police and Prisons’ Service insist that their uniforms, fades, and other insignia must not be used by District Administrations,” to ensure that the lines between the local and central government institutions remained clear.¹²⁸

Such issues, however, had long been present in local government prisons and thus do not explain why Amin undertook the merger at this time. A more likely explanation for Amin’s decision was declining convicted prisoner population in the 1970s. But this requires further scrutiny, particularly

given the regime's inclination for exaggeration and falsification. Amin's regime regularly boasted about the falling prison population in official documents, using this to claim that his government had effectively dealt with *kondoism* (armed robbery) and other criminal activities. One government report, for example, boasted that the prison labor shortage was due to the "considerable reduction in criminal figures" since the coup, which it attributed to "the combined efforts of the Army and Police security forces."¹²⁹ This narrative of decline was specifically focused on convicted prisoners, whereas the population of "unconvicted" prisoners—those who had not been given a trial and were not meant to engage in prison labor—increased significantly. Between 1973 and 1974, for example, this population reportedly rose by nearly 40 percent.¹³⁰

Despite the self-serving nature of the state's rhetoric and the limited information available in government records, it does appear as if Uganda's prison population went down at times in the 1970s. UPS documents from this period often convey a sense of crisis. Writing to the officers in charge of each prison in 1973, for example, the office of the commissioner of prisons brought attention to this issue: "No doubt you are fully aware of the present shortage of labor all over our Penal Institutions, and as a result most of our giant Farms suffered a great deal due to a considerable fall of the prisoners' population."¹³¹ To solve this, the government had decided that all prisoners sentenced for more than six months in local government prisons would be transferred to UPS, thus continuing an older policy that had lapsed. District administration prisons also reported major shortages. In 1972, for example, the administrative secretary of the Busoga local government noted that Bufulubi—the biggest farm in the region—had only 90 of a possible 450 prisoners, making it very difficult to run the farm.¹³² While this was specifically attributed to a mass release of prisoners that had taken place in honor of the anniversary of Amin's coup, similar shortages emerged within other district prisons throughout this period. Official documents provide several reasons for the drop, including new provisions in the constitution that took away some of the powers of local police forces and a change in graduated tax laws, which led to tax defaulters being imprisoned for a week as opposed to three or six months.¹³³

Beyond these reasons, however, the decline in Uganda's convicted prisoner population was due to the shift in punitive tactics during the Amin years. While this is discussed in more depth in chapter 5, a few points are worth mentioning here. Put simply, the Amin state regularly dealt with perceived "criminals" through means other than incarceration. Following the Economic Crimes Tribunal Decree in 1975, for example, Ugandans charged with crimes such as smuggling, "hoarding," fraud, and "overcharging"—all of

which would have previously led to imprisonment—were tried in a military tribunal and faced “death by firing squad.”¹³⁴ Furthermore, security agents could shoot those designated as *kondos*, or armed robbers, on sight without consequences, something that Amin actively encouraged, reminding security forces that “there was no food in the prisons to be wasted.”¹³⁵ Rather than take up space and use resources in prisons, therefore, Amin wanted those labeled as “criminals” to be killed. The Amin regime also placed many Ugandans—not only high-profile political detainees—in informal detention sites that fell beyond the purview of UPS. If the prisoner population did decline, therefore, it would have been due to the regime’s use of other, more brutal forms of detention and punishment. Amin’s decision to integrate the two systems may therefore have been a desperate bid to improve UPS’s productivity at a time when the country’s economy was in ruins and the prisoners who would have normally been used for this work had been killed by the state.

Whatever the reasons behind it, the merger proved to be temporary. The Uganda-Tanzania War, which broke out in 1978, put much of the work of government on hold and likely compromised the effectiveness of the integration process. In 1983, after the war and Obote’s return to power, the decision was made to divide the prison services again.¹³⁶ In total, ninety-eight prisons were returned to district administrations, while UPS retained eleven.¹³⁷ Local government prisons continued to exist until 2006, when they were taken over by UPS as part of the new Prisons Act. Ultimately, after decades of uncertainty and debate about the existence of separate services, UPS was finally the sole prison authority within Uganda, thus marking the creation of a national prisons service.



In the 1960s and 1970s, the Ugandan state harnessed prisons for a range of political agendas. In the aftermath of independence, Obote and later Amin presented prisons as productive, professional, and “modern” institutions that could enhance the nation’s unity, boost its legitimacy on the world stage, and foster economic development. In doing so, they built on many aspects of the colonial legacy, including the association between prisons and the “modern state” and the emphasis on prison farms and industry. While official discourses did not reflect the realities of incarceration, they demonstrate the state’s need to generate a positive image of prisons, particularly as these institutions were so closely associated with colonial repression. In examining why prisons endured in the aftermath of independence, it is important to consider their symbolic power and how postcolonial leaders leveraged this in pursuit of their goals.

3 ~ Professional Identities and Institutional Imaginaries

Prison Work in the Postcolonial State

I FIRST met Margaret (pseudonym) in her family home on the outskirts of Kampala. As we sat together in her living room for an interview, my eyes were drawn to a black-and-white photograph, hung in a green-and-gold frame on the wall. It depicted Margaret as a young woman, dressed in the crisp white uniform of female prison officers. On her head rested the signature maroon cap of the Uganda Prisons Service (UPS), complete with the emblem of a golden crane. In the photograph, Margaret appears self-assured, exuding an aura of authority with her posture and expression. The image hangs alone on the wall, accorded a place of honor and visibility in this family space. Similar photographs can be found in many living rooms of retired prison officers, providing a stylized snapshot of long and varied careers. Like the passing-out ceremonies or the recruitment advertisements mentioned in chapter 2, these photographs serve as a stage upon which ideals of professionalism can be performed. For the family, such photographs provide a reminder of the importance of the profession in the making of the home. For visitors, they are meant to demonstrate the householder's contribution to Uganda's public service. These photographs are important spaces of memory, pride, and performance.

This chapter examines prison officers' professional identities and experiences during the 1960s–80s. It does this by engaging with three analytic scales: the transnational networks that prison officers experienced through their travel and education, the spaces within Uganda's prison system where they worked and often lived, and the more intimate setting of retired officers' homes. In most scholarly accounts of African penal spaces, prison officers have been cast as stock characters, used to confirm wider assumptions about the failures of postcolonial states. This chapter, in contrast, closely examines officers' experiences, stories, and identities. It draws primarily on the oral histories of prison staff who worked in the decades under study. Most are retired, but some are still employed within UPS. Many expressed a sense of nostalgia when discussing the early stage of their careers, speaking wistfully about what they characterized as the "golden age" of Uganda's prison system in the 1960s, which they contrasted with the "dark days" of the 1970s and 1980s. Their personal narratives—especially those of high-ranking officers—often mapped onto the historical narratives of UPS, reflecting the ways in which individual and institutional memories intermingle and create powerful modes of history making. These officers' accounts are self-serving on many levels, emphasizing the state's emphasis on rehabilitation and professionalism, and thus they must be situated in relation to more critical accounts from prisoners and observers beyond UPS. Ultimately, their narratives provide invaluable insight into how prison officers saw themselves and their institution and, just as importantly, how they want to be seen and remembered.

While the study of prison staff and other "violence workers" is unsettling, it is also necessary in order to understand why Ugandans chose to work in carceral spaces after independence, thereby enabling prisons to persist.¹ As Michelle Moyd discusses in her work on askaris in German East Africa, studying these groups often "disconcerts because it reminds us of our own conscious and unconscious imbrications and complicities in the various state structures and institutions endowed with responsibilities for protecting law and order and national security in our societies."² Moyd argues for the "ethical importance" of trying to understand "how and why" individuals choose to work in institutions of state violence and "what outcomes the commitments produce for them, for those around them, and for the states that employ them."³ This chapter adopts a similar approach. It also insists that such inquiries should not be done in isolation from engagement with prisoners' lived experiences, which, as subsequent chapters show, provide critical counterpoints to the narratives of governments and prison staff.

Historians of Africa have paid close attention to the figure of the “intermediary.” Through their roles as clerks and translators on behalf of the colonial state, these actors were able to “mediate and bridge the gap between the colonizers and the colonized.”⁴ Studies of intermediaries have examined the tenuous nature of colonial power and shown the dynamic processes of adaptation and resistance among local bureaucratic agents. More recently, the focus has shifted from administrative roles to consider other professions. Moyd’s study of askaris, for example, illuminates both their relational and coercive roles within the state, tracing their status as “colonial agents, householders and community members.”⁵ Most studies of intermediaries use these figures primarily as a vehicle through which to understand the state, paying little attention to the intersection of their personal and professional identities. *Carceral Afterlives* instead treats officers’ personal relationships as indispensable for understanding their professional experiences and the wider history of Uganda’s prison system. As part of this, it explores the gendered dynamics within UPS, showing how particular conceptions of masculinity and femininity shaped officers’ identities and interactions within the workplace. Ultimately, prison officers’ understandings of professionalism were closely tied to their status as social beings embedded in wider communities, which generated particular loyalties, ambitions, and notions of respectability.

Along with positioning prison officers as intermediaries, this chapter also argues that the temporal boundaries of this intermediary category can be extended beyond the colonial period. Thinking about the ontology, meaning, and role of intermediaries after independence invites us to question chronological categorizations such as “colonial” and “postcolonial,” as well as thinking through shifting ideas about the state. As discussed earlier, many institutions of the postcolonial state were structurally and ideologically similar to their predecessors. Although formal decolonization had occurred, most professionals—such as bureaucrats, psychiatrists, or lawyers—worked in institutions still firmly entrenched within older norms and logics.⁶ For some, this was reassuring and useful.⁷ Others were plotting new horizons of expectation in step with an ambitious political elite eager to assert their own brand of modernity.⁸ These postcolonial intermediaries moved between multiple sites, scales, and imaginaries of belonging, grappling with a palimpsest of ideas about power and progress.

Ugandan prison officers occupied a similarly liminal position. They were deeply involved in thinking through and acting out new visions of progress,

absorbing transnational penal models along with changing visions of nation building. As discussed in chapter 2, colonial-era norms continued to shape their work, evident in the aesthetic of prison officers' uniforms, the routinized drills and parades they performed daily, and the prison buildings in which they worked. Furthermore, by working in prisons, officers also accepted and indeed enabled their ongoing existence in the postcolonial state. For some, this reflected a genuine commitment to the idea of the "modern" prison, while for others this work offered relatively secure employment in an economic context marked by widespread inequality and precarity. In exploring these dynamics, this chapter illustrates the interplay of postcolonial ambitions for change with the durability of more long-standing institutional norms.

BECOMING A PRISON OFFICER

There were many reasons why officers chose to work in prisons. Some were drawn to the uniform. Martin (pseudonym), who had joined UPS shortly after independence, recalled how the "boys were very smart in their uniform," explaining how "that is what attracted me most" to UPS.⁹ Isaac (pseudonym), who joined around the same time, was similarly enamored with the professional dress, which he also called "very smart."¹⁰ Although this does not explain why officers chose UPS over other uniformed professions, it indicates that they desired to be part of a collective unit and that the uniform was considered an important marker of professionalism.

Other officers were drawn to the sporting opportunities. As discussed later in this section, sports were an integral part of UPS's institutional culture, and prison officers were given the chance to compete both locally and internationally. As Matthew (pseudonym), who became a warder in the late 1960s, explained, "Being a youth and liking sport, it was my choice to go to Uganda Prisons."¹¹ Others framed their motivations in moral terms. Benjamin (pseudonym) sought out work at UPS in the 1960s because he wanted to "protect people," while Isaac, who worked as a prison chaplain, emphasized his interest in "restoring people from one side, the criminal side, to the side of the innocent and the safe people."¹² Finally, some officers joined UPS to get away from home, particularly women. When she entered UPS in the late 1950s, Margaret recalled how many of her female colleagues joined UPS because they were "just tired of being married."¹³ UPS would have been a uniquely attractive option for women looking to distance themselves from their families, as—in contrast to nursing or teaching—it allowed them to be posted far away from their home areas.¹⁴ Some thus joined for practical reasons, while others emphasized more abstract motivations linked to idealized notions of public service.

Once they joined UPS, recruits and cadets were assessed in terms of their education and physical attributes. All new officers, regardless of rank, had to meet certain height requirements, with men reaching a minimum of five feet, eight inches and women a minimum of five feet, six inches. They had to fall between the ages of twenty-three to thirty-five, have “normal vision without spectacles,” and have no criminal offenses.¹⁵ The only exceptions to these general requirements were candidates who had been discharged from the police or the army with “very good character,” a remnant of UPS’s entangled origins.¹⁶

Officers could join one of UPS’s two sections: civilian or uniformed.¹⁷ Although these divisions carried over from the colonial years, the number and type of positions within each section changed considerably after independence. The civilian or technical staff included those who worked in farming and industrial instruction, building projects, clerical duties, and welfare programs. These ranks were filled through the Public Service Commission, rather than internally.¹⁸ The men and women who held these positions possessed professional qualifications and brought a specific skill set and knowledge base to UPS.¹⁹ The uniformed staff was divided into senior and junior ranks. As of 1966, there were nine junior ranks and seven senior ones.²⁰

Educational attainment was the primary criterion separating the uniformed entry ranks, therefore favoring those Ugandans who had most benefited from the colonial education system. Initially, recruit warders and wardresses were expected to have completed primary school, although many of them attained higher levels of education.²¹ Cadet principal officers who joined UPS directly were required to have a Cambridge School Certificate or a General School Certificate,²² meaning that they had completed secondary education.²³ However, long-serving officers who had an “exemplary record of discipline and ability to command and control men” could be exempted from these requirements. Cadet assistant superintendents of prisons (CASPs) were expected to have a Cambridge School Certificate, Grade I, although many came to UPS with university degrees.²⁴

Over the course of the 1960s, the quality and quantity of applications for UPS rose considerably. Whereas just over one hundred trainees were enrolled at the outset of 1963, the average number had risen to three hundred by the end of 1964.²⁵ As the 1966 Annual Report suggested, “Many of the well educated school leavers of today were keen and interested to take up the Prisons Service as a career.”²⁶ In 1968, more than three thousand applicants were interviewed for approximately 240 recruit warder posts, and there were eight hundred applications for seventeen CASP positions. Towards the end of the decade, nearly a quarter of the recruit warders had a Cambridge School

Certificate, despite requiring only primary education to qualify for the position.²⁷ In 1969, individuals who held Higher Schools Certificates applied for the recruit warder position for the first time in UPS's history.²⁸ The combination of enhanced conditions and more vigorous recruitment had thus contributed to an improvement in the quantity and quality of applicants, drastically changing the nature of UPS's personnel from the colonial period.

All recruits and cadets were required to complete a period of training before entering UPS. Regardless of rank, this took place at the Prisons Training School at Luzira. The school is one of the first set of buildings one sees when entering Luzira's imposing gates, located next to a field where officers can engage in physical activity. Little has changed in this space over the years. Like the rest of the prison buildings, entrance to the school is through a large gate guarded by an officer. Immediately after entering, one passes by a line of offices for senior staff. There is an open square at the center of the school, providing a space for drills, parades, and ceremonies. In contrast to the rest of the Luzira grounds, the school's environment is often cheerful, with recruits chatting in corridors and children playing in the staff housing areas that sit on the school's outskirts, serving as a community space with schools, churches, and shops.²⁹

During the early postcolonial period, the school could hold approximately 250 recruits and forty training officers at one time.³⁰ Recruits stayed in dormitory-style dwellings, with multiple single beds placed together in rows in a large room.³¹ CASPs had their own hostel,³² as did the female recruits.³³ A senior officer was appointed as the school's commandant, and the lecturers were drawn from within UPS, other government departments, or universities.³⁴ The training experience differed across the ranks. Recruit warders and wardresses underwent the shortest period of training, initially for a total of six months.³⁵ They were taught the fundamentals of prison administration, first aid, Kiswahili, parade, the proper care of arms, and musketry. Additionally, recruits were involved in a range of activities such as obstacle courses, sports, and drama. By 1969, the training had been extended to twelve months, and included firefighting, foot drill, judo, and taekwon do.³⁶ Upon completion, recruit warders had to pass an exam in order to become a prison officer.³⁷

Training for cadet principal officers was more specialized. As of 1966, they were required to complete a nine-month course, which was presumably extended as the training for the other ranks lengthened. The curriculum included lectures on penal law and "preliminary principles of criminology and penology" in addition to the material taught to the recruit warders. Like the recruits, the cadets also needed to pass an exam before finishing their

training. Upon successful completion, these men and women became principal officers, the highest position within the uniformed junior ranks. They were eligible for promotion up to the rank of assistant superintendent of prisons.³⁸

CASPs—the highest entry rank—went through two years of training. They learned about a wide range of ordinances pertaining to criminal law in Uganda, “Principles of Contemporary Criminology and Penology” and “Rehabilitation Programmes.”³⁹ As discussed later in this chapter, CASPs were also required to undergo a period of training overseas. Upon completion of the training, all CASPs were immediately appointed to the position of assistant superintendent of prisons and could be promoted up to the rank of commissioner of prisons.⁴⁰ It was these individuals who went on to play the most prominent roles in shaping UPS’s postcolonial development, forming its core leadership group.

Most officers remember the training as an intensive experience. Parades, stemming from UPS’s colonial military heritage, were an important aspect of the daily routine, providing senior officers with the chance to inspect recruits’ appearance and assess their general progress. Their physical limits were tested on a daily basis. For William (pseudonym), who had joined UPS in the mid-1960s, the corporeal aspect of the training stood out. “You learn, of course, the physical fitness,” he remarked. “You need to run up and down, this and that. You also learn parade, [it] is the most important thing to make you fit. . . . That was almost a daily thing, yes, almost twice in a day.”⁴¹

Once they completed their training, officers began their work in prisons. While their duties varied according to rank and prison site, the work environment was structured around routine, regulations, and paperwork. The Prisons Act provided the legislative framework for UPS, but it was the Prisons Standing Orders that structured the daily operations. Created by the commissioner of prisons, these orders were enforced by the officer in charge (OC) of each institution. The orders were incredibly dense and precise, providing instructions on everything from where officers should mark their initials on their uniforms to lists of punishments for disciplinary offenses. They were intended to ensure standardization across prison sites, and all officers were expected to know them inside and out.

Knowledge of and adherence to prison regulations were two of the most important markers of a professional prison officer. “To bring a civilian into a prison warder . . . we trained them, they learned the law, the rules and regulations pertaining to prisons, and how to run the prison as a professional,” Luke (pseudonym) commented. Discussing his own career, Luke

spoke proudly about his and his colleagues' commitment to these regulations. Referring to the early postcolonial period, he remarked, "We were running the prison according to the rules and regulations. . . . We were doing as they say, by the book."⁴² Similarly, Matthew argued that the corpus of regulations created unity within UPS, as the officers shared "one language of coordination. . . . It is one language and it remained the same even if you went anywhere in Uganda Prisons Service, it is one language, one word. . . . It is rooted."⁴³

Officers' performance was constantly being measured and evaluated. Their job performance was carefully scrutinized, with formal evaluations twice a year.⁴⁴ All junior officers were required to use service recorders in order to track their movements and hours of work. Failure to use a recorder properly would result in a disciplinary inquiry and often led to strict punishment.⁴⁵ As Benjamin recalled, rigid time-keeping governed officers' daily movements: "Time, time factored—the place we worked. . . . Time management it was up to date."⁴⁶ The code of conduct for officers was outlined in the Prisons Act of 1964 and was closely linked to UPS's emphasis on rigid discipline. Offenses ranged from threatening or assaulting a senior officer to smuggling letters for prisoners.⁴⁷

All officers were expected to remain politically neutral when carrying out their work. This was enshrined in the Public Service Commission's ethos, as well as the Prisons Act. In a document outlining the "philosophy" of Uganda's Public Service Commission, "Neutrality" was the first major heading.⁴⁸ Public servants were expected to "deliver goods and services to the people," and to do so with "impartiality."⁴⁹ UPS provided detailed regulations surrounding officers' political engagement, which extended to their lives outside of their working hours. According to the Standing Orders, UPS officers were not allowed to "join or be associated with any organization or movement of a political character." They were also barred from joining "clubs, associations, trade unions or societies other than those existing for purposes of recreation, sport, or education for social intercourse."⁵⁰ Officers could not express their political views publicly and were prohibited from "making speeches or joining in demonstrations in favour of any political person, party or propaganda." Adherence to the principle of neutrality extended to officers' appearance, as they were prohibited from wearing "clothing, badges or emblems indicating adherence to or support of political parties."⁵¹ Officers who contravened these regulations were punished with up to a year in prison or through a fine.⁵²

In interviews, officers presented this neutrality as if it was automatic and unshakable given their role as public servants. Most of the officers

whom I interviewed had worked under multiple presidents, and while most acknowledged that politics affected UPS, they insisted that its core purpose and institutional structure remained the same regardless of the government in power. This principle was often discussed with a defensive tone, perhaps due to the officers' concern about the negative perceptions of their institution in the 1970s and 1980s. Patrick (pseudonym), who had started working in the midst of the Amin years, insisted that UPS kept on "moving" despite political changes. "You see, in Prisons Service," he commented, "we don't engage ourselves in other activities, but with our work, we are perfectly working nicely."⁵³ For Benjamin, this commitment to neutrality was enhanced by UPS's custodial role, one that he viewed as more passive than the police. "Prisons don't arrest people from outside," he remarked; "they are brought to them." Since prison officers' role was "just custodian," he continued, they "didn't have problems with anybody."⁵⁴ As is discussed in chapter 5, however, prison officers were given powers of arrest during the Amin years, therefore undermining Benjamin's argument. Matthew, who worked under all of Uganda's presidents, presented UPS's commitment to neutrality as steadfast and fundamental: "Prisons has never gone into politics. . . . With prison officers where there is any change, where there is anything, we continue with our work. We are taught, we signed for it . . . we don't change."⁵⁵

Finally, merit-based promotion was another key principle of UPS. When discussing their career trajectories, retired prison officers emphasized the many opportunities for promotion. Those who had started in the junior ranks were eager to point out how high they had risen within the UPS hierarchy due to their work ethic and expertise. Patrick, who started as a warder clerk, was incredibly proud to have ended his career as an officer in charge.⁵⁶ Similarly, William spoke with pride about his "rapid promotions," emphasizing his work ethic. To be promoted at the time, he explained, "you must be hardworking, a disciplined person" as well as perform your duties well. "Because of my capability, I was selected among the rest," he proclaimed.⁵⁷

Prison officers' professional identities thus rested in part on their adherence to bureaucratic principles. This meant honoring the regulations, developing expertise through training, working conscientiously in the hopes of being promoted, and asserting one's loyalty to UPS and the state ahead of any president. Officers did not always adhere to these principles on a day-to-day basis, as is the case with public servants everywhere. This does not mean that we should not engage with their retrospective narratives, but rather these should be approached critically as spaces of both individual and institutional memory making. As Jocelyn Alexander argues in her study

of the Zimbabwe Prisons Service, scholars studying postcolonial bureaucracies should ask “how formal state institutions are conceived and how they claim and wield authority from the point of view of their actors.”⁵⁸ By understanding how prison officers frame not only their own careers but also the wider value of their profession, we can better understand why they chose to work in these institutions.

OFFICERS’ SOCIAL WORLDS

For most officers, prisons were not only their place of work but also where they lived. Apart from those in the senior ranks, staff were generally required to live on the prison grounds. Officers thus worked, ate, slept, and engaged in recreational activities within prison sites, blurring the boundaries of their professional and personal lives. This social history, however, has not been closely examined within scholarship on the global history of prisons. Examining these dynamics helps us to better understand the wider institutional culture beyond training manuals, recruitment advertisements, and other official narratives.

Staff quarters varied in type and quality across the prison system. In the 1960s, government officials made a concerted effort to raise the standards of officers’ living spaces from the colonial period.⁵⁹ The original building plans for Luzira indicate that the staff lived in ten blocks made up of sixteen quarters each.⁶⁰ In smaller UPS sites, officers often lived in small houses clustered together. These were usually sociable spaces. For example, documents on Mbale Women’s Prison describe how female staff could be found sitting together on their verandas drinking tea and chatting after work. At Moroto Prison, however, officers lived in “uniports”: small aluminum huts that were commonly used to house members of the police and the army.⁶¹ This living situation was “extremely uncomfortable,” as Moroto was very hot for most of the year and the uniports had limited ventilation.⁶² Senior officers, in contrast, were often given relatively spacious homes, some of which included “servants quarters.”⁶³ The son of Leonard Kigonya, a former commissioner of prisons, remembers growing up in a house in the affluent Kampala suburb of Kololo, where many UPS administrators lived alongside other government officials.⁶⁴ There were also other social sites on prison grounds. When space permitted, officers were allowed to have small plots within the prison grounds to grow their own food, especially if they worked on prison farms.⁶⁵ Many prisons had staff recreation halls, which were designed so that officers could “purchase refreshments and play a variety of recreational activities which are meant for relaxation from [the] long odious duties of a prison officer.”⁶⁶

In interviews, most prison staff mentioned the close relationships that they had forged with their colleagues. This is not surprising, as officers generally lived far from their home areas, often working in a part of the country where they had no local connections and could not speak the primary language. Matthew characterized relations within UPS as “friendly” and said the officers were like a “family.”⁶⁷ For Benjamin, UPS was his most important community. “We were all friends, we work together,” he remarked. “In fact, I don’t think whether there is any ministry or any department which people would love . . . each other like prisons. There isn’t. This is a really complete family. A family more than your own family.”⁶⁸ Government officials encouraged this collegial atmosphere. Speaking to a group of technical staff in 1965, Minister Bataryingaya remarked, “All employees of Prisons Department are brothers and sisters and they must all work as members of one team and one family, they must all work in harmony.”⁶⁹

Prison sites were also spaces of romantic relationships. The geographies of intimacy within UPS often involved multiple spaces, persons, and locales. Many officers were married with children, but it was not uncommon for officers to have extramarital relationships, especially when they were posted far from home. For example, Bob, a principal officer at the Training School, was married to a female prison officer stationed in Gulu. They had six children, although it is not clear from the archival material where the children lived. Bob also had a “girl friend” by the name of Regina, with whom he had another three children.⁷⁰ Similarly, Okomi, a principal officer, lived with a woman by the name of Sophia in the prison barracks, while his wife lived with the couple’s children in a nearby village.⁷¹ In some cases, prison officers could face disciplinary action for bringing an “unauthorised wife” into their quarters.⁷² Some women, in contrast, lived on the prison grounds with their husbands. For example, an officer named Vincent was married to a nurse with whom he lived in staff quarters at Katojo Prison along with their three children. According to his wife, however, Vincent had three children with another woman.⁷³ Evidence of these extramarital relationships is, unsurprisingly, difficult to find in the archival material and does not come up in interviews. The few examples that are available appear in a commission of inquiry that examined the disappearances of Ugandans during the Amin years, as the wives of prison officers often served as witnesses and sought out their husbands’ other partners in an attempt to locate the missing men.⁷⁴ As is discussed in chapter 5, many UPS staff were targeted by the Amin state in the 1970s.

Not all officers, however, had close relationships with their colleagues. In files covering disciplinary proceedings, there are numerous examples of

disputes between officers over issues such as gossip, housing allocations, using “abusive language,” and, in some cases, assault.⁷⁵ Such behaviors were actively discouraged by the senior administration. For example, the dangers of gossip were specifically outlined in the Standing Orders: “Idle rumours or criticism, personal or otherwise, are readily exaggerated or twisted into assorted facts, which, being passed from person to person, may result in great harm to individuals.”⁷⁶ In some of these incidents, disputes were framed in terms of ethnicity—a reality that undercut UPS’s self-fashioning as space of national unity. There were also domestic disputes on the prison grounds, which, at times, led to intervention by senior prison authorities.⁷⁷

Female prison staff faced many challenges in their daily work environment, which was shaped by a culture of masculinity that echoed back to UPS’s military heritage. Within the archives, this shows up most clearly in disciplinary cases, in which women’s “deviancy” was understood in gendered terms. Female officers were often singled out for spreading gossip, behavior that was considered promiscuous, or being unmarried mothers. UPS officials variously described these women as “quarrelsome,” “unruly,” “audacious,” “saucy,” “impudent,” “insolent,” having “acted emotionally,” and displaying “unbecoming behaviour.”⁷⁸ The scrutiny of female officers’ actions extended to their bodies, such as disciplinary cases involving abortions, which was described by one senior officer as “terribly immoral,” or disputes over maternity leave.⁷⁹ Being a mother and a prison officer was

FIGURE 3.1. Staff and prisoners at Mbale Women’s Prison, 1960s. Photo album of former commissioner of prisons Fabian Okwaare, personal collection of Henry Lubega.



particularly challenging. Female officers were frequently criticized and punished if childcare duties interfered with their work. Depending on where they were posted, they had limited access to schools or to family members, thus making it difficult to find support when needed. This was particularly true for those who were raising children on their own, a situation that had motivated some women to join UPS in the first place.⁸⁰ Gender dynamics thus played a significant role in shaping how female staff were perceived and treated within UPS.

Along with living together, officers also engaged in recreational activities with their colleagues. While the archival evidence permits only glimpses into this world of leisure, it hints at the ways in which “respectable” relaxation was tied to notions of professionalism. Some attempts were made to provide spaces for leisure during the colonial period, such as the opening of a recreation hall at Luzira in 1940.⁸¹ Following independence, staff welfare programs and recreation facilities were expanded. Officers’ welfare committees, first introduced in 1957,⁸² had been created at all prison sites by the mid-1970s.⁸³ Those charged with overseeing staff welfare were meant to advocate for the establishment of recreational opportunities and common eating areas;⁸⁴ they also were meant to ensure the provision of education for staff children.⁸⁵ These facilities were especially important in more isolated regions. For example, a recreation hall was opened at Moroto Prison in August 1971 in order to “enable officers to enjoy social and cultural activities so that they can feel at home in remote areas.”⁸⁶

Sport was arguably the most important outlet for recreation, a trend that had also begun in the colonial period. In his 1939 report, Alexander Paterson encouraged UPS to recruit warders who were athletic, noting “skill at games is a distinct asset” for prison work.⁸⁷ This reflected the wider promotion of athleticism within the colonial security organizations, particularly the military. Following independence, UPS continued to emphasize the sporting opportunities for staff. An annual prisons “Sports Day” was created, in which officers competed in various events at the Luzira grounds.⁸⁸ UPS also created clubs to take part in regional and national competitions.⁸⁹ Athletes from UPS competed in the Olympics Games and other international events, including the East Africa Athletics Championships, football matches for the national team, and the Commonwealth Games. For example, in 1966, Recruit Wardress J. Bawaya went to the Commonwealth Games and was named Sportswoman of the Year in Uganda.⁹⁰ Stephen Kiprotich—a prison officer and the winner of the gold medal in the London 2012 marathon—epitomizes this culture of sporting prowess. In recognition of his achievements, Kiprotich was promoted to the rank

of assistant commissioner of prisons, demonstrating how much athletic excellence is valued within UPS.⁹¹

Other outlets for recreation, rest, and spiritual welfare were also available. There was a Prisons Band that would play at different national events, as well as a choir.⁹² The majority of prison sites had chapels and offered services for multiple faiths.⁹³ According to Isaac, who was a senior prisons chaplain in the 1970s, the officers “needed a lot of spiritual support” to enable them to carry out their work.⁹⁴ Officers also turned to alcohol as a source of relaxation. In some stations, alcohol was available for purchase through a licensed provider in recreation halls on the prison grounds.⁹⁵ Not surprisingly, however, there were strict regulations regarding its consumption. Although officers were technically not forbidden to “drink in public bars in uniform” when they were off duty, it was “not a practice which reflects any credit on the individual or the Service” and was thus “considered undesirable and will be avoided save in exceptional circumstances.” However, drinking on the prison grounds or in “private clubs” was tolerated.⁹⁶ While the Standing Orders do not elaborate on what is meant by a “private club,” it suggests a “respectable” place in which to consume alcohol, one deemed appropriate for professionals. For many postcolonial professionals—especially public servants—“socially exclusive drinking” was an important marker of status.⁹⁷ There were significant debates about respectable drinking in this period, as the government sought to promote a drinking culture that fit with official visions of a “modern” state.⁹⁸ Professionals and public servants were expected to drink bottled beer and spirits that were produced in the formal economy, as they were “taxed, uniform, and clean,” and thereby suitable for those with “status in and through the state.”⁹⁹ Such regulations, however, did not prevent many officers from being intoxicated while at work. There are numerous reports in the personnel files of officers “sleeping on duty” while under the influence of alcohol, an issue that was treated very seriously as it could undermine security within the prison. In Moroto Prison alone, nearly all the offenses committed by staff in 1971 were related to “excessive alcoholic drinking which impaired efficiency.”¹⁰⁰ Often, these violations would be dealt with by monetary fines, but repeated incidents could lead to dismissal. There could be many reasons behind officers’ frequent intoxication. Missing their families and the strains of the job are among the most likely. Such stresses are visible in officers’ correspondence with their superiors, as they wrote about the problems “encircling” them at work and at home, and the impact this had on their health.¹⁰¹

While some officers embraced the social environment of UPS, others struggled to balance professional and personal commitments. In most

instances, officers were expected to put their professional duties ahead of their personal ones. As stated in the Standing Orders, "All officers of the Service must understand that they are always liable to transfer and that the exigencies of the Service must override any purely domestic considerations." The orders stipulated that getting married would not affect the frequency with which they were transferred or increase their chances of working in their home area.¹⁰² Officers had mixed views about the balance between personal and professional commitments. For some, personal sacrifices were seen as part of the job. When asked about his experience of working far from home, for example, Stephen (pseudonym) responded, "It wasn't very difficult. . . . When we were joining, you'd first say that you would serve anywhere in Uganda."¹⁰³

For most officers, distance from loved ones and frequent transfer was a part of their professional reality. This often resulted in significant anxiety over how to manage one's home from afar. Martin, who was from eastern Uganda, recalled the struggles he faced while working on a prison farm in northern Uganda. "By then the communication was so tough," he remarked, "we only communicated through writing; your family is some hundreds [of] miles away."¹⁰⁴ Posted a considerable distance from home and granted up to a few weeks of leave per year, many officers felt disconnected from their families and struggled to provide them with anything beyond material support. As a result, one of the most frequent forms of correspondence in personnel files was requests for transfers to or near an officer's home area. In attempts to elicit sympathy from their superiors in the hopes of obtaining a transfer, officers presented themselves as providers and caretakers, grounding themselves in networks of relationships. Many emphasized how they were not only taking care of their own children or spouses but also providing support to parents, siblings, and extended family. These transfer requests often came in times of familial crisis, such as the death of a family member. In some cases, officers also sought transfers to distance themselves from problems at their current station, such as disputes with colleagues or members of the wider community. At times, these requests for transfer were granted, but they were often dismissed. As the provincial commissioner of prisons wrote in response to one request, "Almost everybody has a problem of one kind or the other. If we are to consider each and every ones [*sic*] problems there would be no transfers."¹⁰⁵

These requests reveal some of the gender dynamics within UPS. Male officers frequently emphasized their role as providers for a wide familial network, charged with the responsibility of paying for school fees for children and siblings as well as supporting their aging parents. They also requested

transfers to save struggling marriages. Other men worried about maintaining control of their property, reflecting the precarity of landholders' rights in Uganda. "When you finish the five years [in UPS]," Martin remarked, "you get someone [who] has already taken two hectares from you. What about ten years? How many hectares will go away? You come for a short leave of one month, you can't go take the man to court."¹⁰⁶ Female officers, on the other hand, usually foregrounded their precarious position as mothers who lacked support. They requested transfers so that their children could go to better schools or live nearer to extended families.

Although less visible in the archival material, prisoners obviously faced similar challenges when it came to managing family dynamics, but had fewer avenues to redress them. One of the few mechanisms for support was writing letters to local government officials. In these, prisoners expressed concerns about many aspects of their familial life, including the breakdown of marriages, loss of land, and an inability to provide material and emotional support to their families. One prisoner, for example, wrote to the district commissioner in his home area to intervene in a "marriage dispute." Prior to his sentence, he explained, he had been engaged and had paid a dowry to the family of his future wife. The wedding was not only "suspended" on account of his conviction, but his fiancé had allegedly become the wife of another man and was due to have a child. The prisoner asked the district commissioner to intervene, citing the "customary laws" that would require the family to pay back the dowry.¹⁰⁷ While the outcome of his request is not clear from the archival material available, this case speaks to the significant personal and financial strain that incarceration could cause.

As was the case with prison staff, prisoners were also concerned about losing their land. In one case, a prisoner's wife had reported to him that the chief had "chased away" his family from the *kibanja*, or the land they held.¹⁰⁸ Following a complaint from the prisoner, the UPS administration made some attempts to intervene, stressing the importance of land security for prisoners upon their release. Writing to the district commissioner of the prisoner's home area, a senior prison officer remarked, "As our main purpose here is to rehabilitate wrongdoers, and we normally ask them to go back to their mother land and begin cultivating, so as to adjust themselves to the norms of Society, I therefore request to exray [*sic*] this case properly and find out the cause before this man is released."¹⁰⁹ Again, whether due to gaps in the archive or indifference on the part of the district commissioner, there is no evidence that this prisoner's land was secured. The losses experienced while incarcerated, from fractured relationships to the undermining of property rights, had an indelible impact on many Ugandans' lives long after they were released from prison.¹¹⁰

Prison staff often witnessed these struggles firsthand, as interacting with prisoners was, of course, central to officers' day-to-day work, especially those in the more junior ranks. Officers held a range of attitudes when it came to prisoners and the difficulties they faced. For example, Margaret spoke about working with women who were "rough" and "terrible" but attributed this to their social circumstances rather than some innate characteristics. Discussing women who were imprisoned for murdering their husbands, she acknowledged that many had committed the crime because the men had forced them "to work hard" and didn't "care" about the women or give them any money. Similarly, when discussing one prisoner whom she described as a "vagrant," Margaret recalled how the woman's "son was mistreating her" and had forced her to move from Bunyoro to Entebbe. The woman confided in Margaret that she had "become [a] vagrant so that the government can take her back to her home." In Margaret's experience, female prisoners became "*pole pole*"—they softened—over the course of their stay in prison and tried to become "good women."¹¹¹ While Margaret was particularly attuned to how social circumstances could affect a person's behavior, some male officers also expressed their belief that all offenders could be reformed. "Our work is to make sure that whoever makes maybe a mistake, we try to train him fully so that when he goes back, he fits into society," commented William.¹¹² Echoing this, Patrick characterized the prison as a "centre of rehabilitation." Referring to prisoners, he remarked, "When they go back, they become good people, most of them, after release. . . . They're not our enemies."¹¹³ Such positive perceptions of prisoners may simply have been strategic and were certainly not universal, but they do indicate how prison staff applied official discourses about rehabilitation to their own understandings of prison work.

To carry out their duties, many officers believed that their own personal character played a key role. Charles (pseudonym) insisted that he and his colleagues had to be "disciplined so as to discipline the inmates."¹¹⁴ Similarly, Benjamin praised the character of his fellow staff members. "They were very decent people, and people with discipline," he remarked. "Up to now, when I meet a prison officer I respect him . . . the senior or the junior, I respect him. They are the best, and they know what they are doing." Speaking with pride, he commented, "There's no department in Uganda which is better than prisons."¹¹⁵ This character development, they argued, was a product of their professional experience. "Prisons taught me so many things," remarked Charles. "I have learned that I should never be a person who cannot guide myself," he commented.¹¹⁶ Patrick, who became a prison officer at a very young age, framed UPS as an important space of personal growth. "I'm happy

with prisons,” he remarked. “It trained me, I was a young boy, I left school, it actually gave me money, it gave me a foundation.” Sitting in his family home, Patrick spoke with pride about how his career had enabled his family to have a good standard of living. “I married, I got land, I built. . . . It gave us some school fees, my children studied, I have my madame here. . . . I’m a *mzee* now!” he exclaimed.¹¹⁷ Similarly, Benjamin discussed how UPS had “lifted” him. “I was taught things in my life which I would not have known in my life,” he remarked.¹¹⁸ For these officers, their professional identities were thus intimately intertwined with their personal ones. As William remarked towards the end of an interview, “I am who I am because of who? That Service.”¹¹⁹

Many officers emphasized the wider respect they attained within their families and communities as a result of their profession. When I asked Benjamin what he liked most about his work, he immediately replied, “The respect. Prison officers respect the public, and the public respect prison officers.”¹²⁰ Both Benjamin and William noted how their status as prison officers had helped them gain prominent leadership positions in their communities. Others focused more on abstract notions of respectability. “My family recognized me as a big person,” remarked Margaret. “And up to now, I’ve got people who have called me *Affende*,” she stated—a term of respect that indicates she had received a level of esteem among her colleagues usually reserved for men.¹²¹

This pride is also evident among officers’ family members. For example, Richard (pseudonym), an active UPS officer, reflected on how his parents’ careers—his father was a high-ranking prison officer and his mother was a nurse within prisons in the early postcolonial period—positively impacted their family. “It has really changed our family, improved [it],” he commented. Reflecting on his relationship with his father, Richard remarked: “I was inspired by him. . . . He’s a hardworking man. . . . I want to be like him.”¹²² Ultimately, when looking back at their careers, many officers reflected upon how the moral and interpersonal dimensions of their professions made their work worthwhile. This could be measured in terms of their belief in the reformatory power of prisons, developing one’s own character, sending one’s children to school, or getting respect in one’s community. While these professional imaginaries were widely held across the ranks, the next section discusses how senior staff had a unique identity and experience.

THE OKWAARE GENERATION:

TRANSNATIONAL PENAL NETWORKS IN THE 1960s

Upon walking into the Prisons Training School Library, one is immediately struck by the range of books lining the shelves. Old files from the colonial

era mingle with crisp new criminology texts, and faded prison reports from other countries are interspersed with works by British prison reformers. In one folder, a jumble of book request forms can be found, revealing officers' desire to read works such as George Sabine's *History of Political Theory: An Introduction to Economics for East Africa*, published by Heinemann Educational, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's play, *This Time Tomorrow*.¹²³ On the bottom of a shelf towards the front of the library, a large photo album is tucked away under a pile of files. Its weathered pages contain photos of impressive industrial machines, smartly dressed officers, and imposing prison walls. The album documents Fabian Okwaare's tour to Ontario, Canada, and New York State in 1967.¹²⁴ This was one of many international trips that Okwaare took while serving as the commissioner of prisons; others included visits to at least three continents and several other African nations. Okwaare was not the only member of UPS to go abroad in the 1960s: senior prison officers also traveled to courses and conferences with the aim of enhancing their professional development. Within UPS, this group of senior prison staff—here termed the “Okwaare generation”—was deeply engaged in a transnational community of penal experts and practitioners, one that was being reimagined and restructured as decolonization unfolded across the Global South.

The Okwaare generation was bound by many shared experiences: most joined UPS shortly after independence, trained overseas, and had prestigious careers. As is explored in chapter 5, they were also targeted by Idi Amin's security agencies in the 1970s. In the years immediately following independence, however, theirs was an experience characterized by ambition and possibility. Members of this group embraced the dominant transnational ideas of the prison in this period, honing their understanding of these through their training overseas. They were also engaged in a process of experimentation, balancing concepts learned elsewhere with local circumstances and political agendas. However, this process was often fraught with tensions. While members of the Okwaare generation speak proudly about their contributions, they are also candid about the shortcomings of UPS. Through exploring how these hesitations, negotiations, and convictions emerged among this group, we can better understand the conceptions of professionalism forged within UPS after independence.

When asked to reflect upon their careers, many retired prison officers are quick to bring up Fabian Okwaare. As the first Ugandan to hold the position of commissioner of prisons, he is remembered both for his professional achievements and his character. The late Joseph Etima, who would go on to serve as commissioner of prisons and later head of the Uganda Human Rights Commission, referred to Okwaare as his “mentor” and characterized

him as a “very good man.” In Etima’s estimation, Okwaare “aggressively took on his duties,” including the “expansion of the farms,” the recruitment of officers with “better education,” and the introduction of subjects such as criminology and penology into the training curriculum.¹²⁵ Similarly, James Opolot—a former prison officer who went on to become professor of criminology in the United States—described Okwaare as a “self-taught criminologist” who “acted as a catalyst” for change by creating a network of criminologists, intergovernmental organizations, and foreign scholars.¹²⁶ Erwin K. Baumgarten, who authored a report on social defense in Uganda in 1971, singled out Okwaare as one of two “local experts” who had made the study possible, thus suggesting his prominence within the wider national landscape of institutions associated with law and order.¹²⁷

In the eyes of many of his colleagues and contemporary observers, Okwaare’s most important legacy was the expansion and professionalization of prison farms and industries. Although such policies were initiated by the colonial administration, Okwaare’s colleagues credit him with having cemented their importance within UPS.¹²⁸ Okwaare’s achievements have also been recognized more recently: in 2015, he was listed as one of the “100 most influential Ugandans” of all time by the *Daily Monitor*, Uganda’s leading contemporary newspaper.¹²⁹ Evaluating the significance of these achievements, the article emphasizes UPS’s productivity and apparent spirit of collaboration in the 1960s: “During his time, Uganda prisons was the only government department that was self-sustaining in terms of feeding, and it was the prisons that fed the police and army. Its manufacturing section was responsible for making police uniforms and shoes. It was the prisons carpentry that produced all government furniture across the country.”¹³⁰ Okwaare’s legacy therefore continues to permeate public memory, indicating the lasting positive perceptions of UPS among many Ugandans during his time as commissioner.

Okwaare was born in Tororo District in eastern Uganda. He attended Tororo College, a prestigious Catholic secondary school.¹³¹ Following his studies, Okwaare joined UPS in the early 1950s, receiving training from primarily British officers.¹³² His rapid rise in the organization suggests a career that flourished from its inception. Originally a probationary jailer, Okwaare reached the position of deputy commissioner of prisons in 1962, the highest rank to be achieved by a Ugandan at the time.¹³³ This led to new opportunities, such as an invitation to attend the East African Prison Commissioners Conference in Dar es Salaam in November of 1963.¹³⁴ Okwaare became Uganda’s commissioner of prisons in July 1964, representing a key milestone in the process of “Africanisation” initiated in the late colonial period. Upon receiving this promotion, he was praised by his colleagues for the “hard

work and long hours of study” that had led to his career advancement.¹³⁵ His new status was met with jubilation in his home district: Okwaare’s motorcade was greeted by “cheering school children” on the road into Tororo Prison, where the staff held a reception in his honor.¹³⁶

A diverse range of influences shaped Okwaare’s penal philosophy. He had been trained at a time when colonial prisons were increasingly measured against external frameworks. After independence, Okwaare intensified his involvement in the growing global community of penal and criminology experts. One of his first major appearances on the international stage was at the third UN Congress on the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders, held in Stockholm in 1965. Okwaare seemed to have considerable standing within the congress community, as he was elected to be the vice-chairman of the discussions on “Social Change and Criminality.” Along with representatives from Britain, the United States, the Netherlands, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), his team included the director of the National Centre of Social and Criminological Research in Cairo, the director of the Criminology Program at the University of Puerto Rico, and the head of the Institute of State and Law of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow.¹³⁷ Undoubtedly, this diverse group came with a range of understandings of criminality and penal administration. One can imagine the conversations that Okwaare may have had about crime in the Soviet Union or prisons in Puerto Rico. Significantly, Okwaare and the representative from Egypt were called upon to serve as chairman and vice-chairman of this group, indicating the increased visibility of professionals from the Global South in this forum.

Okwaare’s itinerary that year was particularly full. Following his time in Stockholm, he proceeded to Britain for a tour of penal institutions.¹³⁸ He then went to the fifth meeting of the International Society for Criminology in Montreal. Approximately 1,700 delegates were in attendance, representing forty-four countries. Okwaare was vice-chairman of the meeting, a position he shared with delegates from Canada, the Netherlands, Venezuela, Japan, and the United Arab Republic. At the close of the meeting, the general secretary of the society emphasized the emergence of “unquestionable unity” among the participants in terms of their emphasis on the “scientific humanization of treatment.”¹³⁹ By the end of 1965, Okwaare had worked with penal experts from multiple continents, assumed a leadership role in both the UN Congress and the International Society for Criminology, and visited prisons in Canada and Britain.

The following year, Okwaare and Leonard Kigonya, who was then the assistant commissioner of prisons, attended the Conference on Penal

Problems in East Africa.¹⁴⁰ Held in Dar es Salaam, it brought together prison administrators, experts in criminology, and legal scholars.¹⁴¹ At the conference, Okwaare chaired a panel and offered to be the chairman of the newly launched East African Society of Criminology.¹⁴² Although it is unclear if this society ever materialized, its intended purpose was to promote the “exchange” of criminological ideas, to “stimulate research” in the field, to organize meetings, and to “form liaisons with international and other organizations overseas active in the field of criminology.”¹⁴³ Regardless of its trajectory, the impulse behind its creation represented the growing interconnectedness between criminology experts and prison administrators in East Africa.

Okwaare’s next round of international travel came in 1967. He returned to Montreal, this time to attend the seventeenth International Course in Criminology, which offered lectures on topics such as “The Administration of Criminal Justice,” “The Prevention and Treatment of Crime,” and “The Viable Future of Criminology.”¹⁴⁴ There were a total of 218 participants representing twenty-seven countries, the vast majority of whom were from Europe and North America.¹⁴⁵ Okwaare was also in the minority in terms of his profession, as only eighteen participants were prison staff. Upon completing the course in Montreal, Okwaare embarked on a tour of prisons in Ontario and New York State, which is documented in the photo album mentioned at the beginning of this section.¹⁴⁶ It has over fifty pages of photographs, ranging from staged portraits with North American prison staff to indicate a spirit of collegiality and equality to images of prison sites that Okwaare potentially saw as models for UPS. The placement of the photo album in the Training School library suggests that it had a didactic purpose, intended to instruct new recruits and provide a visual representation of penal modernity.¹⁴⁷ Similarly stylized shots appear in Okwaare’s personal photographic collection, showing his determination to document and preserve his version of UPS’s progress.

While in Ontario, Okwaare went to Ottawa and Kingston. In the latter, he toured the Correctional Staff College for Canada’s prison service and met with Murray Millar, the officer in charge of the college. Okwaare also visited other prisons in the area, where he had the opportunity to view large-scale industrial and agricultural projects. The photos from these visits hint at Okwaare’s admiration of such facilities, featuring close-ups of specific machines as well as panoramic shots of large workshops. His visit to New York was more diplomatic in nature. Okwaare went to the state prison headquarters in Albany, visited the New York Staff College, and met the commissioner of prisons. As was the case in Kingston, a sense of professional camaraderie

is apparent in the photographs of this visit, with the caption of the meeting with the New York commissioner reading, “Two Commissioners discuss their problems.”¹⁴⁸ Okwaare’s final stop was the UN headquarters, where he met with Uganda’s ambassador. This last visit likely provided an important opportunity for Okwaare to discuss his findings from the trip and to garner support for his vision among UN staff.

Two more trips appear in the archival record. In 1969, Okwaare attended the Regional Preparatory Meeting of Experts in Social Defence for Africa in Addis Ababa.¹⁴⁹ He was one of twelve participants, joined by a Ugandan minister; colleagues from Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Somalia, and Ethiopia; and representatives from the UN and the Economic Commission for Africa.¹⁵⁰ Okwaare was also meant to be part of a Ugandan delegation at the fourth UN Congress in 1970, which included four prison staff, police officers, and members of other government departments associated with law and security, but it appears that they did not end up attending, perhaps due to growing political difficulties at home.¹⁵¹

Okwaare’s career in UPS ended shortly after Amin’s coup. In 1972, Amin appointed him to be the minister of agriculture, forestry, and cooperatives, as mentioned in chapter 2.¹⁵² His time as a minister was brief, however, as he was one of many government officials to “disappear” in this period. A great deal of mystery surrounds his death. In his testimony before the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights (CIVHR), former vice president Mustafa Adrisi indicated that Okwaare and a number of other ministers had disappeared in the early 1970s and claimed that Amin “showed an unco-operative spirit in investigating these killings.”¹⁵³ No other details regarding Okwaare’s death appear in the archival records available. In interviews, prison officers—including those who had worked closely with Okwaare—expressed confusion about the circumstances of his death, as well as profound sadness.

Following the loss of Okwaare, UPS’s presence on the international stage decreased. Ugandan prison officers and government officials still attended the UN congresses, but they were not given prominent leadership roles. Furthermore, no members of UPS appear to have attended any of the regional preparatory meetings held in the 1970s.¹⁵⁴ Within UPS’s archival material, there are only cursory mentions of officers going to places such as Australia, India, or the United Kingdom for further training and education. While many of Okwaare’s colleagues continued to work in UPS throughout the Amin years, they found themselves operating in an environment of considerable constraints and risks. Many, however, saw themselves as actively trying to uphold his legacy despite the challenges brought about by military

rule. These officers fell into two categories: those who had risen alongside Okwaare in the ranks and those who joined following his appointment as commissioner and began as cadet assistant superintendents of prisons (CASPs), as noted earlier.

The latter played a key role in shaping Uganda's prison system, and the remainder of this section focuses on their collective and individual experiences. The first class of CASPs was created in 1963, recruited as part of the official "Ugandinisation scheme."¹⁵⁵ Over the course of Okwaare's tenure, at least seventy CASPs were recruited, with several others receiving the position after being promoted from the lower ranks.¹⁵⁶ CASPs were encouraged to "strive hard for promotion" and joined UPS with the expectation that they would one day fill its highest ranks.¹⁵⁷ The uniqueness of this particular group was in part due to their training. They spent two years in an intensive program at the Training School. By 1966, the curriculum had over twenty individual subject areas, which ranged from fundamentals such as the Prisons Ordinance to lectures on "Principles of Criminology and Penology."¹⁵⁸ Overall, the course reflected Okwaare's promotion of scholastic perspectives, while also drawing on core elements of the wider training curriculum. Additionally, most CASPs had at least one experience of overseas training. During the 1960s, they were required to attend a three-month course at the Prisons Staff College in Wakefield, located in northern England.¹⁵⁹ This program was funded through the Special Commonwealth African Assistance Plan, which provided support for professionals in former British colonies to undergo a period of specialized training in the United Kingdom.¹⁶⁰ In 1964, thirty prison officers from eight countries attended the course. During the training, the cadets received classroom instruction in the principles of prison administration, held short-term placements at local prisons, and had the opportunity to meet British families.¹⁶¹

Other opportunities for travel and training were also available. Throughout the 1960s, many CASPs participated in an Outward Bound course at the Loitokitok School in Kenya.¹⁶² It was one of many schools run by the international nonprofit group founded by German educator Kurt Hahn in 1941, which was designed to promote character building through outdoor education.¹⁶³ Here, CASPs engaged in "mountain craft," map reading, physical training, leadership, "man-management," and first aid—cultivating characteristics that were valued within UPS's culture of masculinity.¹⁶⁴ Some officers were able to pursue higher education overseas. For example, James Opolot and Andrew Kayiira, both CASPs in the late 1960s, were given the chance to attend Southern Illinois University for an "advanced criminology course."¹⁶⁵ After completing his undergraduate degree in Applied Criminology, Opolot

continued to pursue his education, eventually obtaining a master's degree in the administration of justice and a PhD in sociology.¹⁶⁶ He remained in academia, becoming the founding president of the African Criminology and Justice Association. Kayiira also continued his studies, obtaining an MA and PhD in criminal justice and serving as a professor of criminology before returning to Uganda to become involved in politics.¹⁶⁷ He would eventually go on to lead the Uganda Freedom Movement in the 1980s—which opposed the Museveni regime—and was murdered in 1987.

Officers in the Okwaare generation were relatively easy to locate for interviews, as they served in senior roles and are widely known among contemporary prison staff. The five individuals interviewed—Joseph, Luke, Stephen, Margaret, and Simon—were very willing to discuss their careers. In the interviews, they spoke with a mixture of pride, nostalgia, and sadness, reflecting on individual and collective achievements, as well as the many hardships that they encountered. In most cases, they view the 1960s and early 1970s as the best years for UPS—despite the rising use of detention by the Obote I regime, which is discussed in the following chapter. Their stories reflect many of the opportunities and challenges that prison staff experienced after independence. While some details of their careers have been left out to protect their privacy and safety, their narratives offer an important window into how Uganda's first generation of senior prison leadership viewed and experienced their work.

Stephen, from southern Uganda, joined UPS in the mid-1960s. "This was immediately after independence, so they wanted young men who had been to school, who could replace the officers who were going back to Britain. And that's how I came," he remarked.¹⁶⁸ In his view, prison work was a very "attractive" job at the time. After joining UPS, Stephen went to Wakefield with the other CASPs in his cohort. Overall, his reflections about this experience were very positive. After completing the training at Wakefield, he took on some posts at British prisons. Stephen emphasized how his cohort sought to expand upon the colonial legacy, indicating that they essentially maintained the "same system" after independence. During his career, Stephen worked in a range of UPS facilities, steadily rising in the ranks until he attained a very senior position. He spoke very positively about Okwaare, whom he characterized as "one of the greatest commissioners we've ever had." In contrast to his positive experiences in the 1960s, Stephen left UPS due to concerns about his physical safety during Amin's presidency. Like many others, however, he returned to UPS after Amin's overthrow and continued to work as a senior officer until his retirement.

Luke, another high-ranking officer, was born in northern Uganda. Prior to joining UPS in the midsixties, he attended university and served as a clerk in the local government. Luke was familiar with prison work, as he was friends with the OC at the prison in his home area. Like many others who joined UPS, Luke was initially drawn to the atmosphere of professionalism, particularly the “smart” uniforms. He spoke fondly about his experience with overseas training. However, while he found it “helpful” to “see how the prison service in England works,” this training also made him concerned about the “constraints” of UPS, which he felt was “not as advanced” as the British system. At a farewell party, Luke spoke to the group of trainees about the challenges of applying their newfound knowledge back home. “I remember stating that we have learned a lot of modern things here in England, but what we have learned, some of them we cannot apply in our social setting in my country Uganda,” he explained. His conception of a “modern” prison was thus firmly tied to the British model. In contrast to his somewhat mixed experience in Wakefield, Luke was overwhelmingly positive about the Outward Bound course. As part of the training, he had the opportunity to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, which he characterized as “the best experience I ever had.”¹⁶⁹ After completing his training, Luke rose quickly within UPS. During his career, which spanned multiple decades, he worked in many regions of Uganda and at numerous prison sites. Most of his time, however, was spent in Kampala, where he held very senior positions. One of his more unique leadership roles came in the 1970s, when he was posted to Soroti to run the meatpacking factory given to UPS following Amin’s expulsion of the Asian population.¹⁷⁰

Overall, Luke spoke wistfully when discussing the 1960s. “Of course, I am proud that our generation who took over. . . . We were running the prisons according to the rules,” he commented.¹⁷¹ “It was smooth. And highly professional. In fact we took positions where the *Bazungu* [foreigners or White people] were running the prisons, we took over, things were smooth, they were going on well.” He characterized the 1960s as the best time in his long career: “It was the easiest time and, eh, I felt very proud that I had joined a profession where things were good.”¹⁷² However, Luke did not romanticize the period, pointing out that these ideals were not always implemented. When asked about the philosophy of UPS after independence, he replied, “The purpose was of course, [the] rehabilitation of offenders. And there was a lot about reformation, and you know all [these] criminological terms.” Yet, for much of his career, he felt that such ideas were applied inconsistently: “The majority [of prisoners] were just simply locked up. . . . You follow the orders, and that was all at the end of the day. When you complete

your sentence, off you go.” While Luke praised the opportunities provided on prison farms and in industrial workshops, he felt that only a minority of prisoners benefited from these. “The few lucky prisoners were taught tailoring and carpentry, so those, to my own opinion . . . were the lucky ones who would . . . on release, be able to have something to do.”¹⁷³ Luke thus spoke candidly about the gap between rhetoric and reality within UPS, providing a rare departure from the official discourse.

Luke’s colleague, the late Joseph Etima, became interested in UPS after being a member of the Boy Scouts, which was very active in Uganda during the colonial period.¹⁷⁴ Joseph indicated that this experience created a kind of “militarism” within him, leading him to consider both the police and the military for his career. Ultimately, however, he settled on UPS, explaining that “prisons was better, it was handling people, rehabilitating them.”¹⁷⁵ Once he joined UPS, he found the training to be physically challenging and militaristic in nature. After completing his training, Joseph remained at the school. Initially serving as a lecturer, he became the deputy commander, and then the commandant. His trajectory was in many ways closely tied to the philosophies and programs introduced by his mentor, Okwaare. Joseph traveled extensively, attending criminology conferences and training programs abroad. He eventually became the commissioner of prisons and remained in that position for nearly two decades. During this time, he became a member of many transnational organizations—such as Penal Reform International and the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice—often holding prominent leadership roles.¹⁷⁶ Until his recent passing, he served as the commissioner of the Uganda Human Rights Commission, underscoring his commitment to public service. In a tribute to Joseph in the *Daily Monitor*, his colleagues reflected on his transformational impact on UPS, echoing discussions of Okwaare. Recounting this praise, Norbert Mao wrote, “Etima’s professional colleagues extolled his virtues in superlatives. They praised his sense of duty, work ethic, integrity, clear-headedness and compassion.”¹⁷⁷

Margaret, one of the first female CASPs, joined UPS in the late 1950s. She was recruited by a British prison officer who had taught her in a mission school. At the time of her recruitment, Margaret was employed in the Uganda Bookshop, signaling her educational achievement and therefore making her a desirable candidate for a leadership role within the women’s section of UPS. Initially, she did not receive any training. “By that time . . . we just joined and start[ed] work. My training came after I’d been in the Service,” she recalled. Although she did not go abroad like many of her colleagues, Margaret shared many of Okwaare’s views. She emphasized the importance of rehabilitation, commenting, “I think we learnt the prison is not

a punishment, but the training had to [be about becoming] a good citizen.” Margaret was also in favor of the farms and industries. In contrast to Luke, she felt that prisoners regularly benefited from these training opportunities. “Most of the time, the prisoner learnt . . . so they were not punished,” she explained.¹⁷⁸ Margaret steadily rose through the junior ranks and later became a CASP. She was among a small group of educated women who were given leadership roles within UPS. Initially, she worked at Luzira and Mbale women’s prisons, and then became an OC at a men’s prison—a position that speaks to her ability to effectively navigate the masculine culture of UPS. After her retirement, Margaret continued to work in penal administration, helping to oversee district government prisons.

Not all CASPs, however, were enamored with the experience of working at UPS. Simon (pseudonym), who joined UPS in the late 1960s after underperforming on his school examinations, was one such officer.¹⁷⁹ Like the others, Simon attended training at Wakefield, which he characterized as a turning point in his life. Staying up late one night, he pondered his future within prison work. Having seen the approach to prisons in Britain, Simon felt that Uganda’s system had too many limitations. Anticipating the challenges ahead to be insurmountable, he decided to resign upon returning home and pursue a career in business. When speaking about his decision to leave, Simon did not indicate any sense of regret and was complimentary about his former colleagues and the overall direction of UPS.

These brief profiles provide a glimpse into the experiences of the Okwaare generation. For Stephen, Luke, Margaret, and Joseph, the goal of professionalizing UPS along transnational lines was deemed to be a worthy—if difficult—endeavor. In Simon’s view, creating a “modern” prison system seemed like an impossible task, and he subsequently took his ambitions elsewhere. Together, these reflections remind us of both the opportunities and the obstacles facing prison staff after independence. These officers had inherited a colonial institution but now sought to make it their own. This sense of possibility was powerful, propelling a generation of officers into long careers in public service. As is explored in chapter 5, it also played a crucial role in shaping officers’ responses to military rule.

“TURNING POINTS” AND “DARK DAYS”: INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY MAKING

The narrative of professionalism evident in the oral histories of officers also emanates from history-making processes within UPS. Whether it is the insignia on officers’ uniforms, the regulations that shaped their day-to-day work, or the prison buildings, the past is always proximate in UPS. While

these structures and symbols serve as reminders of the institution's history, more dynamic historical narratives emerge from the remembrances and writings of prison officers. This section examines several written institutional histories of UPS, all of which were written by prison officers. Often used for training purposes, these texts played an important role in reinforcing the wider moral economy of professionalism within UPS.

Within these narratives, a few themes are evident. Broadly speaking, this history making falls into two categories: one in which the past represents something to be overcome and another where the past is viewed as a source of strength and resiliency. Some officers oscillate between the two in their accounts, selecting different framings as they work through their own memories and impressions or discuss specific time periods. Many offer a similar narrative arc when discussing the institution's past: they position the 1960s as the "golden age" of UPS, while characterizing the 1970s and 1980s as the nadir. The Museveni years are often presented as a restoration of order and excellence, paralleling the official discourse of his government. Through these texts, officers sought to shape the story of their institution in their own words.

One of the most significant pieces of writing on UPS's history is Joseph Etima's "Historical Perspective of the Uganda Prisons Service and Background to the Prisons Act 2006."¹⁸⁰ Written while he was commissioner, Etima's document sets the tone for many other accounts. It carried significant authority given Etima's position, his decades of experience, and the widespread respect he commanded among his colleagues. In the text, Etima plays with periodization, parcelling UPS's history into distinct eras: "The Infancy Period of the Service" (1906–38), "The Start of the Africanisation of the Prisons" (late 1930s–62), "The Appointment of the First African Commissioner of Prisons" (1964–71), "The Fall of the Prisons Service" (1971–85), and "The Events Towards Change" (1986–2005). The sixth period discussed is from 2006 onwards, following the passage of the Prisons Act. Within this chronology, Etima emphasizes the importance of UPS's leadership, especially Okwaare, whom he uses to define a whole period of the institution's history. Etima singles out Okwaare's appointment as the "turning point for the development of the Uganda Prisons Service," as he oversaw the expansion of farms, the introduction of criminological ideas, and the raising of the educational standards for recruits. In contrast, the section entitled "The Fall of the Prisons Service" provides a cursory and condemnatory account of the 1970s and 1980s. "Due to misrule," Etima writes, "the Prisons failed in following established programmes. This was the dark period so to speak." The section contains no additional information, collapsing nearly two decades

of challenges into one “dark period.” Etima also highlights key moments in UPS’s professionalization across multiple decades, such as the opening of the Training School and the introduction of the rank of African assistant gaoler. He writes about how the “process of Africanisation proceeded smoothly without interruption” from the post–World War II period onwards and notes how the introduction of new leadership in the Museveni years helped UPS to overcome a “rough” patch and develop “positive attitudes.” Etima therefore presents prison staff as the agents of progress within UPS.¹⁸¹

Another key site of engagement with the past is the *Custodian*, the official magazine of UPS. Originally launched in 1974, the magazine was temporarily “abandoned” a year later due to the “political anomalies which characterized the regime of the time,” specifically the “interference in the prisons work by the state security organs.” The November/December 1991 issue—the only one that I could locate—marked the renewal of the magazine, which was meant to “project the Image and ideals of the Uganda Prisons Service to the public” and “provide a forum for prisons staff to exchange views and Ideas.”¹⁸² One particularly prominent article—entitled “Evolution of the Uganda Prisons Service”—provides a detailed account of UPS’s history from the colonial period until the early 1970s.¹⁸³ Likely written by Etima—as it employs similar language to his own written history—it focuses heavily on the colonial period, providing a step-by-step account of key policy developments and the “Africanisation” process. There is no mention of the “dark period,” however, with the article simply ending with a brief discussion of Okwaare’s appointment and the full “Africanisation” of the service by 1973. This can likely be explained by the timing of the article: whereas Etima’s “Historical Perspective” document was written in 2008, a time when discussions of the Amin and Obote II years were more acceptable in public discourse, the *Custodian* article was published in 1991, a period when the National Resistance Movement (NRM) was encouraging all Ugandans to forget this period of history.

The *Custodian* also features a poem written by the editor, Charles Mubbale. This piece of writing expresses a different relationship with UPS’s past: that of weariness. Entitled “The Custodian,” the poem explores prison officers’ struggles to manage their work. In the first verse of the poem, he writes, “What has it done to him? This man must be more than a stereo-type.”¹⁸⁴ Evoking the image of a tired prison officer, the poem reflects the profound challenges within UPS in the 1970s and 1980s. Further, as the second line indicates, the author seeks to counter the stigma attached to prison work. Mubbale’s poem thus seeks to represent prison officers’ struggle to deal with decades of violence and political change.

One of the most comprehensive accounts of UPS's history comes from Moses Kamugisha, a current senior officer. The former records officer for UPS, Moses constructed his narrative using a wealth of archival documents. Like Etima, he provides the most detail about the colonial period, likely a product of the relatively rich archival materials available for this time. Kamugisha also draws on material from the Training School, providing an extensive appendix that traces multiple groups of CASPs. By including such a list, Kamugisha seems to honor their role in shaping the postcolonial prisons service. While much of his account is factually oriented, providing a well-researched timeline of key developments in UPS's past, he concludes with a short comment on the relative resiliency of the institution, arguing that the "Prisons Service has always enjoyed stability as compared to other Civil Service Organizations more so [than] Police and the Army which share the same background."¹⁸⁵

Finally, it is worth mentioning a short document provided by an officer at the Training School in 2016. This was used to educate new recruits with information about their institution's history. One of the most notable features of this document, in contrast to the others mentioned, is the disparaging characterization of the colonial period. This reflects the fact that, among current and retired officers, there are differing views about UPS's colonial heritage. Although Joseph Etima's writing about UPS offers a reasonably neutral portrayal of this period, he was much more critical when interviewed, arguing that the British valued punishment over rehabilitation and pointing out the racism that pervaded the institution. At this time, he explained, British officers were "looking down upon the Africans, they didn't treat them with seriousness."¹⁸⁶ Others insisted that the colonial period marked the arrival of a more disciplined and rule-bound approach. Moses, an active officer, credited the British with introducing "the rule of law" in Uganda, commenting on how they implemented "civilized mechanisms of dispensing justice" and ended the "cruel punishments" of the precolonial period.¹⁸⁷ His comment reflects the ways in which colonial-era discourses of "civilization" continue to shape perceptions of penal systems. In the Training School document, however, a decidedly negative view of the colonial period is expressed: "Uganda Prisons Service started as a small British protectorate branch of the Kings African Rifles (KAR) of 1896. . . . Soldiers of KAR were militaristic in approach in the handling of offenders, with a paramilitary structure, military ranks, drills and parade and a military command structure integrated into training. . . . The training therefore had a punitive ideology that instilled fear in the trainees and centered more on punishments, fear and ensuring security and confinement without paying

attention to rehabilitation.” This culture of militarism, it then explains, persisted throughout the postcolonial period, only ending with the creation of a new constitution in 1995 and the passage of the Prisons Act in 2006, thereby positing the NRM as the key driver of change. The 1960s, in this account, are therefore lumped in with the wider problems of the 1970s and 1980s, rather than being seen as a time of relative professionalism. Within this document, UPS is still presented as a professional institution, but the origins of that professionalism are located in the period after Museveni’s takeover.¹⁸⁸

Together, these documents demonstrate the ways in which the past is mobilized to support and disseminate UPS’s professional identity. Officers turn to the past either as a source of inspiration or as a way to measure progress. The locus of this professionalism shifts variously from the colonial period to the 1960s to the Museveni years, but the key messaging reinforces the identity of UPS as an organization with high professional integrity and considerable expertise.



Prison officers imagined their professional identity in multiple dimensions, envisioning themselves as loyal public servants, disciplined bureaucrats, domestic providers, and community leaders. These conceptions have been constructed through the routines, rules, and records of UPS; through the memories of prison staff; and in institutional history-making projects. With few exceptions, officers provided very positive portrayals of their profession, indicating the extent to which many embraced the institutional culture. It is important to critically unpack officers’ biases and to weigh their accounts against more negative portrayals from individuals who were incarcerated and external observers. This does not mean that we should not examine officers’ narratives, as these allow us to understand how they viewed their work and the value that it brought to their lives personally, professionally, and financially. Such insights help to explain why Ugandans chose to be employed as prison officers and, by extension, how the prison persisted after independence.

4 ~ Detention and Dissent in the Obote I Years

AROUND MIDDAY on October 18, 1968, members of Uganda's Criminal Investigations Department (CID) arrived at the offices of *Transition* magazine in downtown Kampala. Walking into the building wearing "immaculate black suits," the CID men announced that they had come to arrest Rajat Neogy, the founder and editor Africa's leading literary magazine.¹ That Friday had already been a busy day for Uganda's security agents: Neogy's arrest was the third connected with the magazine carried out that day. Before dawn, the Special Force—one of the paramilitary units that served the Obote government—arrested and assaulted Abu Mayanja, a lawyer, former minister, and leading figure in Uganda's Muslim community who had written in *Transition*.² Daniel Nelson, the British editor of *People*, the weekly paper of Obote's party, had also been arrested.³ While Nelson was released within twenty-four hours, Neogy and Mayanja were detained under emergency regulations.⁴

Following his arrest, Neogy was taken to the nearby Central Police Station, a holdover of the colonial policing infrastructure. There, he was questioned by some officers whom he recognized as "regulars at the city's more popular beer-drinking hangouts," and then he spent the night in one of the basement cells. "The atmosphere," he recalled, was "one of easy familiarity and sinister doom." Neogy was then moved to Luzira, another landmark of

colonial punishment. He remained there for nearly a year and a half, including five months of solitary confinement. Reflecting on this experience after his release, Neogy wrote, “The most frightening thing about detention is its arbitrariness and its suddenness, even if you are prepared for it. Like death, you think it only happens to other people.”⁵

Neogy was one of hundreds—if not thousands—of Ugandans detained during Obote’s first presidency. This chapter analyzes the Ugandan state’s use of detention without trial during the Obote I presidency, which lasted between April 1966 and January 1971. In these years, detention without trial was the primary way in which the state sought to punish potential dissidents, including writers such as Neogy, opposition politicians, Obote’s own ministers, lawyers, and many others. Obote sought to make detention the exclusive purview of the executive, removing oversight and protections from other branches of government. This set a dangerous precedent, as the state’s use of detention would become increasingly arbitrary and violent during his presidency and under successive regimes. While arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture have been most closely associated with the Amin regime, this chapter demonstrates that the Obote I government—drawing on colonial precedents—made such mechanisms a key part of Uganda’s punitive repertoire after independence. As Ali Mazrui, a key critic of the regime, argued, “It was Milton Obote, not Idi Amin, who began the militarization of Uganda’s political system,” relying on violence to rule.⁶

While detention was meant to instill fear in the population, many Ugandans bravely criticized the Obote government’s tactics. As was the case in many postcolonial states in this period, the state’s violent use of confinement became, for many, a powerful symbol of the limits of decolonization.⁷ Such repression had been expected during British rule, but its reemergence after independence caused widespread disillusionment. By challenging the regime’s use of detention through the courts, in the media, or in the political arena, Ugandans raised fundamental questions about accountability, democracy, and freedom in their new nation. During the Obote I years, detention was not only a strategy for punishing dissent but also a focal point of dissent.

STATE VIOLENCE AFTER INDEPENDENCE AND OBOTE’S RISE TO POWER

Following a long period of both anticolonial struggles against and negotiations with the British government, Uganda achieved its independence in October of 1962. As mentioned, Edward Mutesa, the kabaka of Buganda, was the president, and Obote, who was from northern Uganda, was the prime minister. Despite this power-sharing arrangement, the state and its citizens

struggled to navigate the regional, racial, religious, and ethnic hierarchies that had been created or exacerbated during the colonial period. The main solution to such tensions was state violence. When faced with instability or potential challenges to its power, Uganda's new government drew heavily on the punitive repertoire of the colonial state, using emergency measures, military force, imprisonment, and detention. As was the case across many former colonies, Uganda retained rather than dismantled many elements of colonial legislation, including the Deportation Act and the power to restrict the rights of citizens during times of war or emergency.⁸

The Bakonzo and the Baamba in western Uganda were among the first communities to experience the Ugandan state's violence. On October 10, a day after independence, the new government announced that, against their wishes, there would be no separate district created for these groups and that they would continue to fall under the administration of Toro Kingdom.⁹ In response, the Bakonzo and Baamba became "increasingly disaffected from the national framework."¹⁰ Building on their long-standing struggle for political representation and equality, they launched the Rwenzururu movement. Members of the movement claimed that they were the "natural owners of the land" and sought to secure their sovereignty and secession from Uganda.¹¹ As part of this struggle, they began targeting institutions and individuals associated with Toro Kingdom. This included attacks on prisons where secessionists were being held, most notably the attack on Bubukwanga Jail in Bwamba on November 10, mentioned at the outset of this book. In this instance, forty prisoners were freed and the jail was badly damaged.¹²

As had been the case in the colonial period, the Ugandan state responded to this dissent with violence. In February 1963, the government announced that the Rwenzururu Society, the organization coordinating the movement, was illegal and that all its members could face arrest and imprisonment. It also declared a state of emergency in Bwamba and Busoga-nora Counties, the primary places where members of the movement lived. Subsequently, more Special Forces were brought into the area to enforce order, constitutional rights were suspended, and the violence against the Bakonzo and Baamba intensified significantly.¹³ Colonial-era policies were thus utilized to undermine resistance towards a nation-state that many in these communities did not see as legitimate.

Incarceration was also an important part of the state's response to the Rwenzururu movement. In the annual report for Toro prisons in 1963, this was clearly laid out: "It is known that the district remained in [a] state of unrest throughout the year. . . . Due to this unrest in the district the people

convicted and committed to prison increased considerably.” Between 1962 and 1963, the region’s prison population had nearly tripled. In 1963, approximately two thousand people were convicted for curfew offenses alone. Others were convicted of more severe offenses, with five persons being sentenced to death in 1963 by the High Court.¹⁴ The response to the movement was an early indication of the Ugandan state’s willingness to use emergency regulations and incarceration to punish its citizens. Uganda was not unique in this regard: as Giorgio Agamben argues, the “state of exception” was (and remains) a key feature of governmentality across the world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹⁵ In contrast to what took place in Uganda in the late 1960s, however, it appears that many of those put into prisons in this period were convicted of emergency offenses, rather than detained without trial. The case of the Rwenzururu prisoners therefore offers an important reminder of how the lines between convicted and “political” prisoners were often very blurred. The prisoners, however, argued that they were “not hardcore criminals” but rather were “only convicted of Rwenzururu offences.”¹⁶ They thus sought to draw a line between those who were being punished for what they viewed as “legitimate” crimes and those imprisoned for political purposes, putting themselves firmly in the latter camp.

The state’s politicized use of incarceration would only intensify in the mid-1960s, particularly once Obote assumed all executive powers. Once Obote’s Uganda’s People’s Congress (UPC) won a majority in parliament in June of 1964, he no longer needed Mutesa’s support, and he moved to further undermine the power of Buganda Kingdom.¹⁷ The 1964 referendum on the “lost counties”—areas of Bunyoro that had been given to Buganda during the 1890s—was a key catalyst in the break between Obote and Mutesa.¹⁸ In the November referendum, residents from the two counties under Buganda’s rule overwhelmingly voted to return to Bunyoro.¹⁹

The Obote government also began using violence more widely. Mengo, the seat of the kabaka’s government, was the main site of this repression. On November 8, two people in Mengo were reportedly killed as police sought to end a “riot” in the area.²⁰ Two days later, Special Force officers responded to a call about a domestic conflict near Nakulabye roundabout in Mengo.²¹ The police reportedly opened fire on a crowd that had gathered at the site of the dispute, killing six civilians and injuring forty.²² Historian A. B. K. Kasozi argues that the Nakulabye killings “marked the first major application of political violence in independent Uganda.”²³ Despite a magistrate’s report indicating that the civilians who had been killed were “violently and deliberately shot by a group of armed policemen,” none of the officers were charged.²⁴ The government offered no apology or support to those affected, setting a

precedent of impunity for both agents of state-sponsored violence and the government itself.²⁵

Obote also turned against members of his own party as it became clear that many did not support his bid for power. Those in UPC's so-called right wing allied with Mutesa and were plotting to remove Obote from office.²⁶ In February 1966, UPC member Daudi Ochieng introduced a motion in parliament to temporarily suspend and investigate Idi Amin—who was the second-ranking officer in the army at the time—and accused Obote of corruption.²⁷ Obote aggressively countered this challenge. On February 22, 1966, he had five of his cabinet ministers—Grace S. Ibingira, Mathias M. Ngobi, Balaki Kirya, Dr. Emmanuel S. Lumu, and George B. K. Magezi—arrested at a cabinet meeting.²⁸ Following their arrest, the ministers were first taken to the High Court, followed by the Naguru Police Station. Later that evening, they were “driven at a terrific speed” to Gulu in northern Uganda and then put into Patiko Prison.²⁹ By relocating his ex-ministers to Gulu, Obote used a long-standing colonial strategy: deporting and displacing dissenting individuals. This arrest was a key turning point in Obote's use of detention. In the estimation of one government inquiry, “the message was meant for all and sundry to know that anybody in Uganda could be arrested in a similar matter anywhere, anytime.”³⁰

With his former cabinet ministers now imprisoned, Obote moved to consolidate his power through what has been called the “Obote Revolution” or the “1966 Revolution.” On the day of the ministers' arrest, Obote announced that he had “taken over all powers of the Government of Uganda,” directly challenging Mutesa's authority as president.³¹ Two days later, he suspended the constitution.³² Addressing the public that day, he exclaimed, “Events and unwelcome activities of certain leading personalities,” he stated, “have led me to take drastic measures to ensure stability, unity and order in the country. . . . The dignity of our country and our people and our independent status cannot be sacrificed for the interests of a few persons.”³³ In April, Obote introduced the infamous “pigeonhole” constitution, which members of parliament (MPs) had not even been able to read before voting on.³⁴ With its passage, all executive powers passed into the hands of the president—a position that Obote assumed—and the power of government authorities in Buganda was significantly undermined.³⁵

Unsurprisingly, this provoked major resistance among the Baganda. The following month, the *lukikko*—the kingdom's parliament—rejected the constitution and demanded that the central government remove itself from Buganda.³⁶ In response, Obote declared a state of emergency and introduced the Emergency Powers (Detention) Regulations, which could be used

for the “detention of persons or the restriction of their movements” as well as for the deportation of noncitizens.³⁷ Many high-profile Baganda leaders were detained as a result of this legislation, and Buganda remained under a state of emergency until Amin’s coup.³⁸ Going further, Obote ordered a military attack on the kabaka’s palace on Mengo Hill, which Amin led. Known as the “Battle of Mengo,” this attack not only resulted in the fleeing of Mutesa into exile but also the death of many of his supporters and considerable damage to the palace.³⁹ The bodies of those killed at Mengo were reportedly buried in mass graves on the Luzira Prison grounds. George Ssentamu—who would become the commissioner of prisons under Amin—indicated that hundreds if not thousands of bodies had arrived at Luzira after this attack. “Many, many people were buried at Luzira during my presence. . . . [I] personally saw 413 bodies being buried,” he claimed.⁴⁰ In the Obote I years, Luzira was thus not only the primary site of confinement for political detainees but also a graveyard for those killed by the regime as it seized power.

Following the Battle of Mengo, Obote made further moves to consolidate his control. He introduced a new constitution in 1967, which was passed in September of that year.⁴¹ Citing the need for “one country, one parliament, one government, and one people,” Obote used this new constitution to abolish all of Uganda’s kingdoms.⁴² As mentioned earlier, this led to the dissolution of Buganda Kingdom’s prisons, with its facilities being passed on to the Uganda Prisons Service (UPS). Along with these changes to the existing carceral apparatus, Obote also set up three paramilitary organizations: the General Service Unit, which gathered intelligence; the Special Force, which acted as a “paramilitary police unit” loyal to Obote; and the Military Police. The Military Police, which was set up under Amin’s leadership following the upheavals of 1966 to “discipline soldiers,” was, in reality, designed to harass civilians.⁴³ The police were also given enhanced powers, particularly after the passage of the Emergency (Powers of Arrest and Search) Regulations in 1969. This enabled officers to arrest any individual whom they had “reasonable grounds for suspecting is about to commit or has committed an emergency offence” without a warrant.⁴⁴ One could therefore be arrested due to mere suspicion, as the police had power to arrest whomever they wanted. The authority of the Obote I regime thus rested primarily on emergency regulations, paramilitary groups that were given free rein to use violence against Ugandans, and detention without trial.

DEFINING AND CONTESTING STATE DETENTION POLICIES

Following the “Obote Revolution,” Uganda became a repressive one-party state. Detention without trial was central to Obote’s ruling strategy. Between

1966 and Amin's coup in January of 1971, many Ugandans were detained in the country's prisons.⁴⁵ While systematic data is difficult to come by—particularly as it seems that detentions were not always recorded—broad estimates can be made about the scale of detention in the Obote I years with the available evidence.⁴⁶ The Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights in Uganda (CIVHR), which was set up after Museveni came to power, provides considerable detail. The CIVHR report indicates that 89 people were being held in custody as of November 1966 through the Emergency Powers (Detention) Regulations, while there were 536 detainees in total held in Luzira between 1967 and 1970.⁴⁷ An article in *Transition* offers similar figures, suggesting that between 40 and 89 detainees were held between October and March 1968, and that, at times, “hundreds” had been held.⁴⁸ Archival materials and press reports also indicate that over 200 detainees were released during the Obote I presidency, while the Amin regime is reported to have released an additional 56 of Obote's detainees following the coup.⁴⁹ Unsurprisingly, UPS records do not explicitly discuss the detainees, but annual reports do indicate a “steady rise” in the overall prisoner population.⁵⁰ Many, however, were remand prisoners—a reminder that the number of prisoners facing criminal charges was also increasing during this period.⁵¹ The highest estimates of the detainee population come from the official media, which, following Amin's coup, carried a story by former Obote detainees claiming that 4,000 Ugandans had been held by the previous government.⁵² While such figures were likely exaggerated by the Amin state in order to further entrench perceptions of his predecessor's repression, it speaks to the deep association of the Obote regime with detention. Based on the evidence available, it appears that the number of detainees during the Obote I years was certainly over 500, if not over 1,000.

When Obote became president in 1966, he sought to enhance executive control over detention, removing previously existing protections and the oversight of other branches of government. Initially, he relied mostly on the Deportation Act, a holdover of the colonial legislation. The limits of this act, however, were made manifest through two key court cases in 1966, both of which contested the legality of the state's use of detention. The first, *Grace Ibingira and Others v. Attorney-General*, centered on the five ministers that Obote had detained and deported to Gulu. While they were in Patiko Prison, lawyer John Kazzora applied for a writ of habeas corpus on their behalf in the High Court—a tactic that many Ugandans would use throughout the postcolonial period to challenge their detention.⁵³ The former ministers argued that they had been unlawfully detained and that the Deportation Act was void under Uganda's constitution. The East African Court of Appeal

ultimately ruled that the act was indeed unlawful when used against a citizen of Uganda, as it was “in violation of the right of freedom of movement” and had been abrogated at independence.⁵⁴ As a result, the five ex-ministers were released, and the Deportation Act was no longer a legally viable option for the government.

This did not, however, stop the Obote regime from rearresting the former ministers. In a series of legal maneuvers that would become common in this period, the president brought the former ministers back to Entebbe, which fell under the state of emergency in Buganda. Before the ministers had even left the airport, they were given detention orders through the Emergency Powers (Detention) Regulations of 1966.⁵⁵ They remained in Luzira until Amin’s coup in 1971. Along with demonstrating Obote’s willingness to punish anyone who challenged his power, the Ibingira case also set an important precedent, making it illegal for the state to detain Ugandan citizens unless a state of emergency was in place. While one colonial tool, the Deportation Act, had lost its power, another remained intact.

That same year, Michael Matovu, the *saza chief pokino* of Buddu in Buganda, also challenged the legality of his detention in a landmark case, *Uganda v. Commissioner of Prisons, Ex Parte Matovu*. He had been a key sponsor of the *lukkiko*’s motion for the central government to leave Buganda Kingdom, which had led to his arrest and detention through the Deportation Act in May 1966.⁵⁶ Matovu was initially held in Masindi Prison and then transferred to Luzira.⁵⁷ Following the East African Court of Appeal’s ruling that the Deportation Act could not be used against Ugandan citizens in the Ibingira case, Matovu was released on July 16, 1966.⁵⁸ However, like the former ministers, he was immediately rearrested and detained under the Emergency Powers (Detention) Regulations before even leaving the prison complex.⁵⁹ Matovu’s detention was justified on the grounds that he was a “person who has acted or is likely to act in a manner prejudicial to the public safety and the maintenance of public order.” Bataringaya, the minister of internal affairs, refused to provide further details about the reason for his detention “because of the highly confidential character of that information and its explosive nature in respect of public security in Buganda.”⁶⁰

Following Matovu’s second detention, his lawyer Abu Mayanja—the same Abu Mayanja who would later be detained for his work in *Transition*—filed for a writ of habeas corpus. He argued that Matovu’s detention was illegal on several grounds, including that he had been “unlawfully brought within the Emergency area” and that the emergency regulations gave the government “unfettered powers which might be wider than those envisaged by the Constitution, and which might not be legally justifiable.”⁶¹ Mayanja

also questioned the legality of the 1966 constitution itself, further raising the stakes of the case. Subsequently, the case was referred to the High Court. In a decision that would have far-reaching implications, the court ruled that the constitution was valid. Referring to Hans Kelsen's *General Theory on Law and State*, the High Court declared that the 1962 constitution had "been abolished as a result of a victorious revolution in law" and that the 1966 constitution was therefore legal, indicating that a coup was a legitimate means of obtaining power.⁶² It also ruled that the emergency powers passed thus far were in accordance with the constitution.⁶³ Obote's punitive tactics were therefore given legal backing.

With Obote now firmly in power, he sought to further expand his control over the detention process. One strategy was to remove existing constitutional protections. Under the 1962 constitution, a detainee had to be notified in writing of the reasons for detention within five days. Furthermore, this information had to be published in the official *Gazette* within two weeks of the detention, and individual cases had to be reviewed by a tribunal one month after detention and then every six months thereafter.⁶⁴ This policy resulted in a degree of transparency, even if it did not always prevent abuses of the system. The 1967 constitution, however, undermined these safeguards. Article 21 (6) outlined that the period for notifying detainees of the reason for their detention would be extended from five days to two weeks, publication in the *Gazette* would occur within four rather than two weeks after an individual was detained, and that cases would be reviewed by a tribunal within three months rather than one.⁶⁵ Consequently, the state now had more time before details of a detention became public and before a detainee's status could be challenged.

Most significantly, however, the Obote regime introduced the Public Order and Security Act of 1967. The purpose of the act was to "provide for the preventative detention and imposition of restrictions on the movement of persons in the interests of public order, public security, and defense."⁶⁶ It was thus rooted in colonial-era deportation legislation and provided the regime with a new method for the preventive detention of political opponents in the wake of the Ibingira case. In passing this act, Uganda joined many other postcolonial African states that already had similar legislation on the books, including Kenya and Ghana.⁶⁷ The government framed the act as essential to the future of the nation, with Bataringaya arguing that it was "absolutely necessary to deal with any person" who attempted to "subvert the stability of Uganda."⁶⁸ With this act, the state expanded its punitive repertoire, while also still relying on emergency powers and other legislation such as the Penal (Unlawful Societies No. 2) Order of 1969, through which

all political parties other than Uganda's People's Congress were banned.⁶⁹ Obote now had multiple means to arrest and detain those who he deemed a threat to his power.

This rollout of repressive legislation did not go unchallenged, however. Along with legal cases such as those involving the ex-ministers and Matovu, dissent also emerged from the political arena. Many MPs raised doubts about the Public Order and Security Act, as well as Uganda's 1967 constitution. E. M. K. Mulira, a celebrated anticolonial leader, compared the act to "death," warning his fellow MPs that "you don't want to play with death," while A. A. Nekyon argued that the "President and police were being given power to eliminate serious political opponents systematically." Mayanja, himself a "veteran nationalist," warned that the Obote state was becoming worse than the British. "One of the most serious indictments against the colonialists," he argued, "was the deprivation of some of the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual." Yet, with this new act, "even those rights and freedom which were enjoyed during colonial times were going to be taken away."⁷⁰ By framing the Obote I regime as worse than that of the British, Mayanja sought to undermine its legitimacy and moral credibility.

Mayanja was one of the leading critics of the state's detention policies. He waged his war on many fronts: along with court cases and debates in parliament, Mayanja also shared his critiques through writing in *Transition* and European newspapers. Through his writing, he continued to call attention to the limits of freedom in postcolonial Uganda and the seemingly unlimited scope of the government's power. Mayanja decried the new constitution, calling it "illiberal, authoritarian, and dictatorial," and said it made "serious inroads in the concept of the rule of law as accepted by most jurists and civilized nations."⁷¹ He was also completely opposed to the Public Order and Security Act, which sidelined the role of courts in detention and demonstrated the lengths to which the Obote state would go to retain control. "Those who advocate preventive detention," he wrote, "are as much concerned with retaining their own positions as with the security of the State." Again invoking the colonial comparison, he continued, "If the colonialists managed to rule us for 70 years without resorting to a detention act, I find it outrageous that our own government of a free Uganda should be so afraid of its own citizens as to want to imprison them without trial."⁷² As he had in parliament, Mayanja sought to undermine the state's legitimacy by comparing it to the colonial government. While his arguments did not account for the colonial state's use of the Deportation Act and other oppressive policies, the weight of his accusation was still significant. It was indeed such a critique that led to Mayanja's detention. In a letter to the editor in *Transition* discussing the

need to “Africanize” Uganda’s court, Mayanja wrote, “Far from wanting to change the outmoded Colonial laws, the Government of Uganda seems to be quite happy in retaining them and utilising them, especially those laws designed by the Colonial regime to suppress freedom of association and expression.”⁷³ On account of this letter, Mayanja was arrested and detained.

Mayanja and Neogy’s arrest, detention, and subsequent trial on charges of sedition were watched closely and heavily criticized by Ugandans and international supporters. The trial, which lasted three days, was fully covered by the *Uganda Argus*, copies of which would be “soldout within hours” of being printed. During each day of the trial, large crowds gathered outside the courtroom in Kampala and would send “cries of good wishes” to the detainees when they emerged handcuffed from the building on their way back to Luzira.⁷⁴ This public display of solidarity was no doubt heartening to the two men and looked upon with alarm by the government, which was already dealing with heightened international criticism as a result of this detention. While concerns about the growing authoritarianism of the Obote state had been raised before, particularly by Ugandans, the “*Transition* affair” made the realities of the regime’s repression highly visible on a global stage.⁷⁵ The responses to Neogy and Mayanja’s situation are illustrative of the ways in which detention was both an enactment of state violence and a symbol of the limits of freedom in postcolonial Uganda in this period.

Powerful critiques of Mayanja and Neogy’s detention emerged from within Uganda—criticisms that were very courageous given the political climate and the state’s violent responses to dissent. Benedicto Kiwanuka, the leader of the Democratic Party, used the case to demonstrate the lack of human rights under the Obote government. Referring to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he commented, “It is unknown here. Abu Mayanja and Rajat Neogy are witnesses of truth on this point.”⁷⁶ Echoing Mayanja’s critique about the coloniality of Obote’s detention laws, Kiwanuka then went on to compare Uganda’s use of detention to Rhodesia, which was under White-minority rule. “Where is the difference?” he exclaimed. “Is prison life sweet to an African if he is thrown into it by a fellow African, and bitter if he is thrown into it by a European racist?”⁷⁷ Such a comparison undermined Obote’s credibility, and, as discussed later, it contributed to Kiwanuka’s detention.

Another key critique came from by Ali Mazrui, a Kenyan-born academic who was the dean of the faculty of social sciences at Makerere University and an associate editor of *Transition* at the time. A few days after the arrest, Mazrui released a statement—one, he said, that had been written “in sorrow.”⁷⁸ He praised both Mayanja and Neogy for their contributions to the

“intellectual liveliness of Uganda” and reflected solemnly on the wider implications of their detention. “So far as we know,” he wrote, “this is not a case of detaining someone who has been plotting to overthrow the government. It looks more like a detention of people for being intellectually honest.” This reality left Mazrui feeling “lonely and shaken,” fearful for not only the fate of his colleagues but also the future of the freedom of expression in Uganda. Obote reacted angrily to the statement, criticizing Mazrui’s “very presence in Uganda” in a speech in parliament.⁷⁹ The government openly condemned him and *Transition*’s other editors, arguing that they were attempting to “meddle in the internal affairs of Uganda.”⁸⁰

Reactions to the *Transition* detention also poured in from around the world.⁸¹ Negative coverage appeared in many newspapers, with headlines such as “Obote’s Showdown with the Intellectuals” and “Uganda Takes ‘Lesson’ from Colonists.”⁸² The latter was written by British lawyer Sir Dingle Foot, whose decision to defend Mayanja was symbolic on many levels, as Foot had defended numerous anticolonial leaders on the African continent charged with sedition in colonial courts.⁸³ The *Los Angeles Times* also criticized the regime, characterizing Obote as “an unpopular president who rules Uganda through the power of the army.”⁸⁴ Neogy and Mayanja’s plight received further attention when the two men were featured in Amnesty International’s “Postcards for Prisoners” campaign, which used letter writing as a strategy to put pressure on governments to release political prisoners.⁸⁵ The Obote state was indeed flooded with letters from around the world protesting Neogy and Mayanja’s detention.⁸⁶

Obote sought to undermine these criticisms. When asked about Neogy’s detention during the Commonwealth Conference in London in 1968, for example, he praised *Transition* and insisted that Neogy “was not detained under Emergency Regulations for anything he might have written against the Uganda Government” but rather due to his association with “certain organizations.”⁸⁷ The latter could have been a reference to the International Association for Cultural Freedom in Paris, which had provided funding for *Transition* and reportedly paid Neogy’s legal fees.⁸⁸ The association had come under criticism, however, as it had, for a time, received CIA funding.⁸⁹ Shortly after returning from London, Obote released an open letter to “all foreign governments” and “all foreign press and journalists,” as well as specific institutions that had criticized the *Transition* detention, including Amnesty International and Syracuse University. In the letter, he condemned the calls for a “fair trial,” indicating that such requests were insulting given Uganda’s “high standards of justice.”⁹⁰ Ultimately, although Chief Magistrate Mohammed Saied bravely acquitted the two men, they were immediately detained

under emergency regulations and sent back to prison.⁹¹ As with the Ibingira and Matovu cases, the Obote I regime again used emergency powers and detention without trial to circumvent the decisions of the courts, as the state sought to show that there were no checks on its power.

Neither Obote's counterattacks or Mayanja and Neogy's continued detention, however, deterred their supporters, many of whom were working behind the scenes. The British government was deeply involved in the case, as Neogy was technically a British citizen despite having been born in Uganda—the result of a restrictive citizenship policy put into place at independence.⁹² It appears that Neogy had tried to renounce his British citizenship in favor of a Ugandan one following this policy change but had not successfully done so, either due to a miscommunication or a deliberate denial by the Ugandan government. Once Neogy's lack of Ugandan citizenship was established, however, the government tried to use this against him. In December of 1968, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sam Odaka declared, "Uganda had learned a great lesson through this misuse of intellectual honesty whereby a man poses as a Ugandan when it suits him and his masters in order to meddle in our internal affairs."⁹³ Despite such attempts to portray him as a puppet of the British government, Neogy still received widespread support. The American government also got involved, partially because Neogy's wife, Barbara, was an American citizen.⁹⁴ She played a key role in pushing for her husband's release, communicating regularly with British government officials and speaking directly with Obote, including a meeting with him that reportedly lasted nearly eight hours.⁹⁵ Likely in response to these local and international advocacy efforts, Neogy was finally released on March 27, 1969.⁹⁶ Mayanja, in contrast, remained in detention.⁹⁷

The *Transition* case received additional international attention when Daniel Nelson, the British editor who had mistakenly been detained instead of Neogy, sued the Ugandan government for wrongful arrest.⁹⁸ As mentioned, Nelson was the editor of *People*, the government's weekly paper, who was either arrested due to a miscommunication or as a reminder that he must "toe the line" in terms of what was published in the paper.⁹⁹ Whatever the initial reason, the government released him within a day of his arrest, calling the whole thing a "small mistake." Before his release, however, Nelson was taken to Lubiri Barracks—a place that both Obote and later Amin used to torture perceived enemies—where he was reportedly "beaten with a stick and rifle-butts."¹⁰⁰ At the time, employees of *People* were shocked, with one commenting, "We all felt humiliated. It is a shame for Uganda."¹⁰¹

While the *Transition* detentions resulted in the most global coverage, the cases of other detainees also received international attention. In

June of 1969, for example, the Obote I state arrested and detained a group of seventy-seven traders reportedly from West African nations—including Mali, Senegal, Niger, Mauritania, the Gambia, and Sierra Leone—as well as one Belgian.¹⁰² The government of Mali got involved, pushing for answers as to why the men were detained. Following an application for a writ of habeas corpus, Commissioner of Prisons Fabian Okwaare had to appear in court to discuss the charges. While many of these individuals were released in August of that year, they were, like so many others, subsequently rearrested without any clear explanation. One representative of Mali's government subsequently came to Uganda to investigate, reporting to the foreign media that rumors about the men's involvement in "criminal conspiracies" were "ridiculous."¹⁰³ Ultimately, most of the detainees were deported.¹⁰⁴ The case was closely followed in the foreign media and resulted in criticism from other African governments, creating further negative press for the Obote I regime at a time when it was under considerable scrutiny.

That same year, the government detained—on two occasions—Benedicto Kiwanuka, one of its fiercest critics. While the details of Kiwanuka's detentions are discussed in the next section, it is important to foreground the role that he and members of the Democratic Party played in challenging Obote's repressive policies. Kiwanuka, like Mayanja and Ibgingira, was a lawyer, and his critique of Obote reflected his belief in the sanctity of both law and liberty. His criticisms of the state's use of detention without trial became an important vehicle for broader reflections on the lack of freedom in Uganda. "The essence of democracy," he exclaimed to the Makerere University Students' Guild in August of 1967, "is not to seek to make laws for detention of citizens without trial but it is the freedom of the individual from that very thing, namely, arbitrary arrest."¹⁰⁵ Sharing a similar sentiment in a press statement in 1969, he noted how the government claimed to safeguard "the equality and dignity of all citizens." "But is this true?" he asked. "Not with the Detention Act on our Statute Book; not with the Emergency regulations extendable at will, without cause, and with so many citizens incarcerated under them without knowledge on their part as to why they are so confined."¹⁰⁶ That same year, the Democratic Party announced that it would not celebrate the anniversary of Uganda's independence as an act of protest—sending a powerful message about the limits of decolonization under Obote. "We find it difficult to go out and celebrate when our fellow freedom fighters—virtually all of them completely innocent—are, purely out of spite and hate, suffering from the most inhuman treatment in prison," Kiwanuka wrote.¹⁰⁷ By characterizing the detainees as "freedom fighters"—a category widely associated with anticolonial struggles—and positioning

them as “completely innocent,” Kiwanuka made a forceful critique about the neocolonial and immoral nature of the Obote regime. He thus sought to undermine the state’s claims to legitimacy, demonstrating that many of the values that Ugandans associated with independence—such as democracy, dignity, freedom, and equality—were a chimera as long as the government’s power rested on detention without trial.

Other Democratic Party (DP) leaders also played an important role in condemning the Obote regime’s practices. For example, Paul Ssemogerere, the publicity secretary for the DP at the time, wrote an open letter to the inspector of police following the arrest of approximately fifty members in September of 1969.¹⁰⁸ Among these were seventeen DP supporters based in Masaka, who were arrested for wearing party colors, calling for elections, and violating emergency regulations regarding assembly. The rest had been arrested outside of the Kampala courthouse where they had been supporting Ssemogerere and Kiwanuka, both of whom were on trial for seditious publication, “publishing false news likely to cause fear and alarm to the public,” and criminal libel.¹⁰⁹ Expressing his “profound concern and shock,” Ssemogerere condemned these arrests and the mistreatment of the detainees, who, despite having “clean” records and being among the “best citizens Uganda has,” were being “treated in a worse manner than that for hardened criminals and murders.” Reminding the government that “we all fought for independence,” he urged them to reconsider their policies. “We pray to the good Lord that you may have the grace to examine your conscience and see whether the arrest under the emergency regulations of so many decent citizens and their continued detention without trial and in such painful conditions can be defended before the law, before man, and before God.”¹¹⁰ Ssemogerere, like many other critics, framed such policies as having transgressed legal, moral, and spiritual orders.

“IT ONLY HAPPENS TO OTHER PEOPLE”:
DETAINEES’ EXPERIENCES AND RESISTANCE

In contrast to the Amin years, and, to an extent the Obote II years, there has been minimal public reflection and discussion about detainees’ experiences during Obote’s first presidency. Whereas several memoirs have been written about detentions in the 1970s, for example, none appear to exist for the 1960s. Benedicto Kiwanuka reportedly wrote a book on the experiences of Obote’s detainees, but it does not seem to have been published.¹¹¹ There are, however, some shorter accounts available through interviews and stories in the media and commissions of inquiry such as the CIVHR. Using this material, this section aims to reconstruct and reflect upon both widely shared

and individual experiences of those detained in the Obote I years, drawing whenever possible on detainees' own words.

Many detainees were well known among the Ugandan public, holding positions as ministers, politicians, religious leaders, and lawyers. Others, however, were less high profile—including students, taxi drivers, post office employees, town clerks, forest rangers—and thus much less is known about their experience.¹¹² Nearly all of the detainees were men, but a few were women, including members of the Buganda royal family such as Nalinya Ndagiere, Nalinya Mpologoma, and Lady Danali.¹¹³ In contrast to what occurred during the Amin and Obote II years, where informal detention sites were used, the Obote I detainees were primarily held in government prisons, with most based in Luzira. Before they arrived in prison, however, some were brought to military barracks or other sites where violence could be covertly carried out. While violence did not occur on the same scale as it would under successive governments, it was a part of some detainees' experience in this period.

In contrast to convicted or remand prisoners, who were charged with offenses in the Penal Code, detainees were held through emergency regulations or preventive detention legislation. In most cases, they had neither gone through a trial process nor were they awaiting one; instead, their status hinged entirely on the president's judgment. Their experience in detention was often marked by isolation from each other, the wider prison population, and their families. Many were held in solitary confinement. Most indicated that they were relatively well treated and did not suffer physical abuse, although, as mentioned, there were reports of violence in spaces outside the prison, as well as in some prisons, particularly those outside of Kampala. DP detainees held at Masaka Prison, for example, reportedly faced "inhuman conditions," including being held as a group in a room that was "8ft by 6ft" and had lice and ticks, having no bedding or ability to bathe, and being prevented from seeing their families.¹¹⁴ Some detainees ended up in prison multiple times, and many were held behind bars for years, being freed only once Amin took power in 1971.

The detainees' experience began with their arrest. Often, this was carried out in a very public manner, such as the arrest of Obote's former ministers or Neogy's arrest at his office. In other cases, it occurred at the detainee's home, as was the case with Abu Mayanja. Many were arrested as individuals, but some arrests targeted specific groups, such as the arrests of large numbers of DP members. Following arrest, most detainees went to multiple carceral sites before ending up in the prison where they were going to be held long term. Within Luzira—and possibly in other prisons if

facilities allowed—detainees were separated from convicted prisoners both physically and visually. They wore “ill-fitting gray uniforms,” while convicted prisoners dressed in “immaculate white.” While almost entirely separated, convicted prisoners were apparently required to serve food to the detainees, reflecting the hierarchy within carceral spaces.¹¹⁵ Although detainees’ experience was mainly one of solitude, it does appear that some built relationships with one another, which no doubt provided a much-needed sense of comfort and connection.

While there are some common threads in detainees’ experiences, it is also important to consider their individual stories. This not only provides more insight into the day-to-day life while in detention, but it also speaks to the variability of experiences and, most importantly, humanizes these individuals, thereby working against the state’s efforts to isolate and silence them. Many detainees in this period bravely shared their stories through testimonies to the CIVHR, writing in international publications, in court, or in interviews with the Ugandan media following their release.

One of the most powerful accounts of detention in this period comes from Neogy, who was Uganda’s most famous detainee during the Obote I years. Unlike some of his fellow writers who were detained, such as Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Neogy did not keep a prison diary, but he did write a short essay about his experience in the *New York Times*.¹¹⁶ Despite its brevity, the piece—entitled “How It Feels to Be a Political Prisoner”—powerfully reflects the challenges faced by detainees in Uganda and elsewhere in postcolonial Africa at this time, as well as their commitment to freedom. By writing in the second person and present tense, Neogy creates a sense of a shared experience between himself and a wider community of detainees.

One of the key themes of Neogy’s narrative is the uncertainty and anxiety caused by detention. This began from the moment of his arrest. Opening his essay, he reflected on his profound shock upon being arrested in the *Transition* office. “Friends still ask me, ‘But did you know it was going to happen?’ Now months after my release, I have no easy answer.” This sense of surprise and unease continued when he was brought to Central Police Station. Recounting his overnight stay in a police cell, he wrote, “You wonder what you might have done to provoke them into uprooting you in the space of a few hours from your family, home and work. You are unlikely to find a reason. Detention is gratuitous and the chilling fact is that there has to be no reason for it other than somebody up there got frightened.”¹¹⁷

Once he was brought to Luzira, however, Neogy’s experience seems to have been characterized more by predictability, the reality of which was

devastating given the conditions of his detention. In Luzira, Neogy was overwhelmed by a sense of isolation, which manifested itself physically, socially, and psychologically. Initially, he was placed in “total solitary confinement,” which lasted for five months. “This means,” he wrote, “that your 5 ½-by-7-foot cell is the circumference of your world for twenty-three hours a day.” Neogy was not allowed to speak to the staff or the other prisoners or to read or write. Visits with his family appear to have been rare, although he did see his wife occasionally. While Neogy had access to books at first, he indicated that this had been short lived, further compounding his sense of loneliness. “Your world and your life is your book-less cell,” he lamented. “You may not write, and in case you have hidden a pencil stub there are surprise searches of your person every few days.” With no books or ability to write and limited access to friends and family, Neogy felt completely cut off from the world. “The political detainee’s isolation from the world . . . is total and awesome,” he wrote. “Even the men on the moon, as they took their first steps, were in continuous communication with the earth—an intimacy the detainee is not even allowed with his own family.” Neogy worried that such disconnection would be permanent: “The political prisoner’s greatest fear is of being forgotten. His gratitude to anybody or any organization that keeps him alive in the outside world is humble and boundless.” Hearing that Amnesty International had made him a prisoner of conscience, therefore, was a huge relief, not only for Neogy but also for his fellow detainees, with whom he seemed to have been able to form connections after his solitary confinement ended. “Our underground grapevine was seething with excitement,” he wrote, as it “meant that Uganda’s detention laws had been brought to world attention.” For some of his fellow detainees, “it was like breathing new air.” Once he was released, he too wrote about the Obote I state’s repression, drawing attention to the plight of those who remained behind bars, such as Mayanja.¹¹⁸

While Neogy and his wife Barbara published articles about his detention, much less is publicly known about the experience of Abu Mayanja. After being arrested at 5 a.m., Mayanja was reportedly taken to Lubiri Barracks, where he was subjected to physical abuse.¹¹⁹ Initially, “rumours” surfaced that he had “died in detention” due to these beatings.¹²⁰ It was later determined that he had been lying unconscious in Mulago Hospital for several days.¹²¹ Mayanja was then sent to Luzira, where he reportedly spent much of his time in solitary confinement.¹²² He was released in August of 1970, alongside twenty-six others, including some other former government officials.¹²³ According to *Drum* magazine, “no reasons were given” for their release.¹²⁴

More is known about the detention of Benedicto Kiwanuka, who, as mentioned, was detained on two occasions in the final few months of 1969. The first detention, however, did not last long. Initially, Kiwanuka was held along with Ssemogerere.¹²⁵ The document that had led to his detention was the political pamphlet published earlier in 1969, in which Kiwanuka had criticized the detention of Mayanja and Neogy and likened the Ugandan state to Ian Smith's government in Rhodesia. The Obote government claimed this was an act of defamation, as it compared Uganda's president to a "declared racist . . . who has plundered and murdered the peoples of Zimbabwe."¹²⁶

Kiwanuka was arrested at home on September 6.¹²⁷ At the time, he was struggling with back issues and had to spend the first few days of detention under the watch of police at Kampala's Mulago Hospital before being transferred to Luzira.¹²⁸ On September 9, he and Ssemogerere appeared in court and were granted bail. When he walked out of the courtroom, Kiwanuka was reportedly "lifted shoulder high" by "hundreds" of supporters waving the green and white flags of the Democratic Party and chanting "long live D.P."¹²⁹ Later that month, both he and Ssemogerere were acquitted and released.¹³⁰ On that day, however, many of their supporters who had once again gathered outside the courtroom were arrested.¹³¹

Kiwanuka's freedom, however, was short lived. Two months later, he was arrested on conspiracy charges due to his alleged involvement in an attempted assassination of Obote in December of 1969 at Lugogo Stadium in Kampala. Multiple high-profile Ugandan political figures were arrested and detained in connection with this incident, including Nalinya Mpologoma and David Simbwa, Kabaka Mutesa's siblings; Paul Ssemogerere, Stanley Bemba, and Alen Keera, all DP leaders; Sir William Wilberforce Nadiope, the former vice president of Uganda and *kyabazinga* of Busoga; and "Jolly Joe" Kiwanuka and Dr. F. Sembuguya, both of whom were members of parliament.¹³² Many, like Benedicto Kiwanuka, would remain in Luzira until Amin's coup.

While in Luzira, Kiwanuka was mostly held in solitary confinement and had little contact with his family other than infrequent "through-the-glass conversations with his wife." According to his family members, Kiwanuka suffered "psychological if not physical torture" in Luzira, which represents one of the few mentions of physical abuse among this group of detainees.¹³³ Kiwanuka himself, however, provided a somewhat different narrative in an interview with the press after his release, indicating that he was "treated very well as prison conditions allowed."¹³⁴ Given Kiwanuka's forceful criticisms of the Obote regime, as well as the Amin state's desire to amplify such critiques in the aftermath of the coup, it is unlikely that he would have

downplayed his mistreatment, but, again, little is known about the details of his experience behind bars.

In April of 1970, Pius Sempa Kawere, a member of Kiwanuka & Company Advocates, became the legal representative for Benedicto Kiwanuka and many other DP detainees.¹³⁵ Following in the footsteps of Mayanja, he argued that their detention was illegal and indicated that he would be petitioning the Constitutional Court. The Obote government, likely wanting to avoid another case along the lines of Ibingira and Matovu, immediately arrested Kawere, who was then taken to Central Police Station, where he remained for three weeks without any charges being made. Once he was given a detention order, he was sent to Luzira.¹³⁶ In keeping with the treatment given to Neogy, Mayanja, and Kiwanuka, Kawere was initially put into solitary confinement. He was allowed only thirty minutes of exercise outdoors each day and was “not allowed to talk to anybody.” After a month, he was moved to a new cell, which had a “mattress, blanket, and bed sheets.” Next to him was Dan Nabudere, an academic and lawyer who had also been detained by Obote. They would reportedly communicate by “banging” on their doors and “shouting” in order to hear each other through the cell walls. Although constrained, this human contact gave him “some encouragement” after a month of solitary confinement. During his exercise period, Kawere could speak to Sir William Nadiope. Towards the end of his stay in Luzira, he was moved to a “better cell” where he was able to “mix with other detainees.” After his release, which happened at some point before Amin’s coup, Kawere continued to be “intimidated and frequently summonsed to Central Police Station,” where he was repeatedly “interrogated.”¹³⁷ He would later be detained in the Obote II years, this time held in Mbuya Military Barracks.¹³⁸ Kawere’s experience illustrates how, for many Ugandans, the fear and reality of detention were a major part of their lives over multiple decades. He was one of the few Obote I detainees who testified about the detention experience before the CIVHR, therefore making it a part of the public record.

Grace Ibingira, one of the UPC ministers who was detained in 1966, also testified to the CIVHR. A lawyer by training, Ibingira had held the position of minister of justice before his detention.¹³⁹ He was, unsurprisingly, highly critical of Obote in his testimony. Discussing the Nakulabye Massacre and the attack on Mengo Palace, he commented, “Once the sanctity of life has been violated, as in these two cases, future violations are easy to commit, rather in a way that sharks react to blood in the water. And so it proved in this case.”¹⁴⁰ In his testimony, he gave a detailed account of the day in which he and the other ministers were arrested. As the ministers were “about to adjourn for lunch” in the midst of their cabinet meeting, a group of “armed

policemen” entered the room.¹⁴¹ Reflecting on this moment, Ibingira commented, “I have never felt such silence. Every thing stopped except breathing.” Following a signal from Obote, he remarked, “pandemonium” broke out. “I felt somebody grabbing my neck very rudely,” Ibingira said, “the policemen pushing me from my chair, putting handcuffs on both my arms.” The five ministers were then each separately put into Land Rovers, accompanied by armed policemen. During this process, many of his fellow ministers were beaten. “I was not wearing a tie, so I was not roughed up,” he explained, “but those who were wearing ties were really almost choked. I remember that they got hold of Mr. Kirya like you get a log of fire-wood and pushed him on the floor of the Land-Rover.”¹⁴² The ministers, as mentioned, were initially held in Gulu Prison, then the nearby Patiko Prison. Following the ruling of the East African Court of Appeal regarding the legality of the Deportation Act, they were detained in Luzira. Little is known about their time in Luzira, but they likely were treated in a similar manner to Kiwanuka and the other high-profile detainees discussed thus far.

Ibingira reflected more broadly on the state’s use of detention without trial through a novel that he published in 1980. Although fictional, the leader in the novel reflects many aspects of Obote’s rule, as he is the country’s first leader after independence, is associated with socialism, and is overthrown in a military coup at the end of the book. Significantly, the plight of one character, Haki, bears some resemblance to many Obote detainees’ experiences. A popular opposition leader, Haki is arrested at his home, thrown into a Land Rover, and driven “towards captivity in a cloud of dust.” He is held in a maximum-security prison “built by colonial authorities seven decades before”—a reference to Luzira that also suggests that Ibingira was critical of the coloniality of Uganda’s prison system. The officer in charge of Haki’s prison had been transferred before Haki’s arrival, as he was “too professional and honest about his work,” suggesting that Ibingira may have held a rather positive view of some UPS officers. In the prison, Haki is put into a “depressing” cell, where he sits in “almost total darkness.”¹⁴³ The conditions of his detention strongly resemble those of the Obote I detainees: he is kept in solitary confinement, is not allowed to write letters or receive visitors, and is served food by convicted prisoners.¹⁴⁴ Although he is eventually acquitted of all charges, he is immediately detained under emergency regulations, much like Neogy, Mayanja, and Kiwanuka.¹⁴⁵ As another character in the novel reflects on these detentions and the government’s violence, he characterizes Uganda’s independence as a “bitter harvest,” remarking that it was “no longer a republic of just laws but a land where vultures rule.”¹⁴⁶ Through this novel, therefore, Ibingira uses a literary representation of detention not only to provide insight

into the experiences of himself and his fellow detainees but also to condemn the Obote government and its betrayal of the independence struggle.

While most of the individual accounts of detention focus on high-profile figures, such as Neogy, Ibingira, or Kiwanuka, there are some from detainees who were little known to the public. One example is the case of a businessman from Burundi, who will be referred to as “S.” Following his release in March of 1971—after Amin had come to power—S reached out to Kiwanuka’s law firm “seeking damages and compensation” on account of his “wrongful detention.” According to his letter, S was arrested on the morning of March 17, 1966, at the Park Hotel in Kampala by members of the Criminal Investigations Department and the Special Force. At the time, he was in his early thirties and was in Uganda on a “business trip” as part of his work in coffee, tea, and tin exports and wholesale. Following his arrest, he described how he was “chained and taken in a Land Rover at gun-point” to the Mengo Social Centre, where he was held for a total of three days. While in Mengo, he claimed that he was “brutally beaten and tortured.” Recounting this experience, S wrote, “I was beaten with gun butts, batons, and kicked in the stomach and all over the body with heavy boots by more than one security officer at a time.” He was then transferred to Moroto Prison. On the way to Moroto, he claimed that he was “beaten all the way being kicked to and fro on the hard floor on of the Land Rover while chained.” S said he remained in Moroto for over four and a half years. During that time, he continued to suffer physical abuse, claiming that he was “beaten and caned while naked nearly every day of the week.” He experienced further hardship due to the poor conditions in Moroto, including being fed “rotten maize,” being given no more than a blanket for bedding, and being refused medical attention despite having health problems. To an extent, S’s experience changed when he was brought to Upper Prison in the Luzira complex in December 1970. While at Luzira, he indicated that he was not beaten and was able to go to Mulago Hospital, although not as frequently as the doctor recommended. S’s account again suggests that there were different standards of treatment between Luzira and more remote prison sites such as Moroto. Throughout his experience, however, he indicated that the was held in “punishment” cells, permitted little to no exercise, and was unable to communicate with friends and family. Not surprisingly, he found his detention experience to be “inhuman, brutal and very degrading.”¹⁴⁷

S was released from Luzira in March of 1971, as the High Court apparently ruled that he “was being detained for no reason whatsoever.” He was never informed of the reason for his detention, given a trial, nor did he appear before a tribunal for detainees. As he mapped out his lawsuit, S sought

to account for the many losses and hardships he had encountered as a result of his detention, thus providing insight into the myriad ways that this experience could affect detainees and their families financially, physically, socially, and psychologically. During his arrest, he indicated that the security forces stole his belongings, including his watch, clothing, passport, and the cash he was carrying at the time. As a businessman, he had incurred significant financial losses, indicating that his store had been closed and that he had lost profits of approximately a million shillings annually. Beyond these material losses, his “good will and business reputation” were “destroyed” due to his detention, and he now faced the challenge of rebuilding from “scratch.” At a personal level, S’s family was deeply impacted by his absence and lost earnings. “My happy home and marriage life were also disrupted,” he wrote. When he returned home, he claimed that his wife had “become a woman of bad reputation.” His own children, he explained, had “lost good education opportunities” as they had been forced to go to “very poor schools” during his absence. S himself had also suffered both mentally and physically. “My once good health has also rapidly deteriorated as a result of my long detention,” he wrote, as he received “little or no medical attention,” was subjected to “bad feeding,” and also faced considerable “anxiety.” This uniquely detailed account speaks not only to the challenges and hardships experienced by detainees while in prison but also to the struggles that awaited them once they got out.¹⁴⁸

Other detainees recounted similar losses, such as Amos Sempa, a former minister of finance. Sempa was detained in 1966 for refusing the new constitution and “plotting to the Kabaka’s return to Uganda.” Unlike many of the other detainees mentioned here, he reportedly was summoned over Radio Uganda. Responding to this call, Sempa made his way to Central Police Station, where he was arrested and then taken to Luzira. Sempa was held in Luzira for approximately five years and was released shortly after Amin’s coup. Discussing the impact of his detention with the media, he indicated that he had suffered “colossal loss” in terms of his finances, “family affairs,” and “leadership.” Like S, he spoke about how the education of his children was “hampered,” and that some had been forced to drop out due to financial issues.¹⁴⁹

Together, these stories reveal a great deal about the difficult and often violent realities that detainees faced during the Obote I years. While some received better treatment than others, their time in detention was marked by uncertainty, fear, discomfort, loneliness, and loss. Many, however, bravely decided to share their experiences, using their stories to criticize the wider brutality of the Obote I regime.

The story of the Obote state's detainees does not end with his own presidency but rather with Amin's coup. When Amin took power in January 1971, many Ugandans across the country expressed profound joy and relief. After multiple years of emergency regulations, detentions without trial, and state violence, Uganda's citizens welcomed what they saw as a new beginning. In his "Eighteen Points" justifying the coup, Amin summarized many of the people's grievances against Obote. The first point on the list read, "The unwarranted detention without trial and for long periods of a large number of people, many of whom are totally innocent of any charges."¹⁵⁰ In the first few months of his presidency, Amin sought to capitalize on the symbolic power of Obote's detainees, framing their newfound freedom as a metaphor for the nation as a whole. This final section explores the ways in which the Amin state strategically used Obote's detainees to project a positive image of his government.¹⁵¹ That he was able to do so, at least initially, indicates just how much these detentions had been resented by Ugandans and undermined the Obote regime's legitimacy.

On January 28, 1971, Amin announced the release of fifty-five detainees held by the Obote regime, such as Grace Ibingira and Benedicto Kiwanuka.¹⁵² That morning, thousands of Ugandans made their way to Kololo Airstrip in Kampala to witness the ceremony, despite the curfew restrictions put in place in the aftermath of the coup. Media coverage of the occasion, both within Uganda and in the foreign press, conveyed an outpouring of joy and gratitude among the public. A video clip from the Associated Press showed a sea of jubilant people cheering, singing, and embracing one another as the detainees arrived in UPS buses.¹⁵³ Images of the ceremony in the South Africa-based *Drum* magazine captured the relief and appreciation of the crowds, including a woman who sank to her knees in gratitude when she met Amin.¹⁵⁴ Much of this coverage had an optimistic tone, conveying the sense of rupture and rebirth that the Amin state had sought to cultivate. As one *Guardian* reporter wrote, "All Obote's main political opponents are now free and Uganda is only a step away from a return to free elections and multi-party democracy."¹⁵⁵ Unsurprisingly, the official press in Uganda shared a similar message of hope. One op-ed contributor wrote that the detainees' release was "concrete proof" of the new spirit of unity and love in Uganda. The article continued, "Many thousands of people turned out yesterday at Kololo Airstrip not only to welcome back their relatives and friends, but also to celebrate what they saw as the beginning of a new freedom for themselves too."¹⁵⁶

While the event was certainly a celebratory occasion, Amin had more instrumental aims. In his speech, he addressed both the detainees and the

wider populace. “Before I release you,” he remarked to the detainees, “I wish to address you and the nation on a few but very important issues,” thus making it clear that his message was aimed at a broader audience. He continued, “You are joining the other free Ugandans at a time of great excitement and joy in the country since Uganda’s military government took over. I have no doubt that you will be joining in this great jubilation.” While he welcomed their celebrations, he also reminded them that they must refrain from breaking the law, as his government “will not tolerate any form of lawlessness.” After calling for “love, brotherhood and unity,” Amin announced the official release of the detainees.¹⁵⁷ For Amin, the ceremony, his speech, and the press coverage provided him with the opportunity to encourage the population to work hard, uphold law and order, and serve the nation. It also reminded the detainees that their freedom was not automatic but rather had to be continuously earned through good behavior.

In the weeks following, the *Argus* featured numerous articles on the release and the individuals who had benefited from it. Along with discussing their experiences of detention, the ex-detainees unequivocally condemned Obote and praised Amin. Former minister George Magezi, for example, who was incarcerated for four years,¹⁵⁸ reflected on the “period of terror and treachery under Obote’s diabolical rule,” contrasting this with the current reality: “We can now speak freely, and once more expect fairness in execution of law.”¹⁵⁹ Sempa, the former minister of finance, declared that he was “quite innocent” of any crime and his wife thanked Amin “for the salvation he has brought to the peace-loving people of Uganda and our family.”¹⁶⁰ This tactical press coverage sought to demonstrate the distance between Amin and the repressive practices of his predecessor.

A few days after the release at Kololo Stadium, a service was held at Rubaga Cathedral—Uganda’s most important site of Catholic worship—to further honor the detainees. According to the *Argus*, “thousands of jubilant people” came to the church that day. During the service, religious leaders framed the release of Obote’s detainees as a “resurrection” and positioned Amin as an agent of God. In his sermon, the Reverend Nsubuga remarked that “the major General saved us and he has forgiven all the people who wronged him.” Bishop Kihangire, who oversaw the proceedings, echoed Amin’s rhetoric, calling on those present to “keep peace and order” and “be united” in their service to their country.¹⁶¹

Around two weeks later, Amin freed Sir William Wilberforce Nadiope, who, as mentioned, had been detained following the assassination attempt on Obote in 1969. The ceremony was held on the steps of Uganda’s parliament buildings. In contrast to other ceremonies, Nadiope was the only

detainee being released, likely due to his high-profile stature. Amin addressed Nadiope directly, urging him to “continue the development of his country with his fellow-countrymen.” Nadiope, in turn, thanked Amin for saving Uganda “from tyranny, and from the corrupt and despotic Obote government.” He assured Amin that he would provide “full cooperation in all he is doing to build a united, prosperous and happy Uganda.” Adopting a similar tone, Amin also used his speech to remind the crowd of his benevolence once again. “Action in releasing prisoners,” he remarked, “should not be regarded as a way to condone crime, but as an indication of the spirit of love, brotherhood, forgiveness and respect in Uganda’s Second Republic.”¹⁶²

Drawing together the momentum of these releases, Amin declared March 7, 1971, as “Detainees’ Day.” The events of the day began with prayers across the country and were followed by a parade at the High Court and a march to Nakivubo Stadium. The parade featured fourteen separate groups of detainees, including Obote’s former ministers; members of Buganda’s royal family; prison, police, and army officers; chiefs; and members of the professional classes. By staging the parade in this way, the event rendered the wide range of Ugandans who had been detained by Obote and released by Amin visible to the public. In reporting on the event, the *Argus* commented that “Nakivubo Stadium was yesterday filled to capacity by thousands and thousands of jubilant and cheering people from all corners of Uganda who had come to commemorate the first ex-detainees day.” In the ceremony itself, the former detainees echoed the rhetoric of unity cultivated by Amin, remarking that they had gathered to “pledge our loyalty” to him

FIGURE 4.1. Amin addresses prisoners about to be released, 1976. Uganda Broadcasting Corporation.

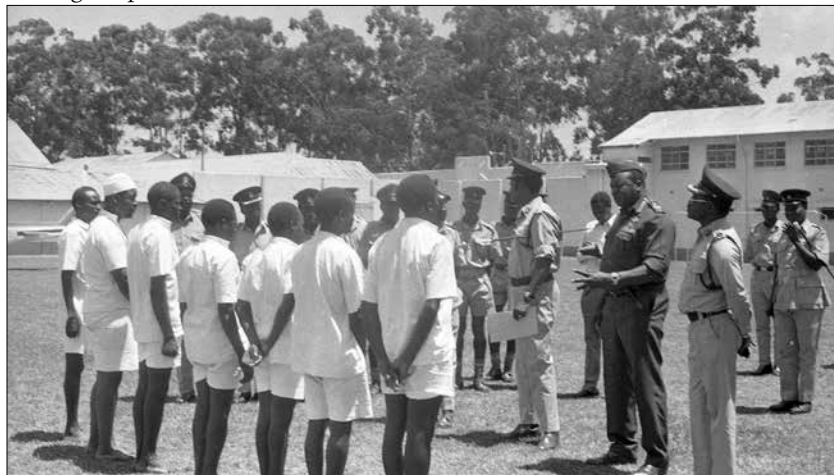




FIGURE 4.2. Released detainees leave Luzira, 1981. As is discussed in chapter 6, Amin's successors also initiated large-scale releases of prisoners. Uganda Broadcasting Corporation.

and assure him of “every cooperation” moving forward. In contrast, they “accused Dr. Obote of building a totalitarian state . . . whereby he sought to control, condition and regiment the lives of all people in Uganda in complete violation of the cherished fundamental human rights as enshrined in the United Nations declaration plus the Charter of the Organization of African Unity.”¹⁶³ Drawing on these international principles served to condemn Obote's actions and to further assert Amin's legitimacy, this time with continental and global reference points. Later that evening, a dinner was held at the prestigious Apollo Hotel in downtown Kampala by the Detainees' Association, which had been formed in the aftermath of the coup. Benedicto Kiwanuka gave a speech on behalf of the association. “To some of us who were still in the prison,” he said, “and who, as we knew, had been condemned to die there, the fall of Obote and subsequent order for our release from detention by Your Excellency meant real resurrection.”¹⁶⁴ “Detainees' Day” thus served as an opportunity to connect the various discursive threads of the previous ceremonies: Amin's benevolence, the repressive ways of Obote, and calls for national unity and progress.



FIGURE 4.3. Crowds gather to see detainees, 1981. While this photo is from the 1980s, large-scale crowds also gathered to see releases during Amin's presidency. Uganda Broadcasting Corporation.

This sense of hope and optimism, however, soon crumbled. A year after praising Amin in the Apollo Hotel, Kiwanuka joined the long list of Ugandans who had “disappeared” at the hands of the Amin state. As is discussed in the next chapter, Amin took many of Obote’s repressive tactics and intensified them, relying not only on detention without trial to deal with perceived opponents but also on extrajudicial killings.



Building on the precedent set by the colonial government, the Obote I regime relied on violence to assume and maintain its power. As part of this, the state turned to detention without trial to punish perceived enemies, removing the legal limits on detention through enacting emergency

regulations and preventive detention legislation. This set a dangerous precedent, as these same tactics would be used and intensified by the Amin state, with deadly consequences. Many Ugandans, however, contested the Obote I regime's abuse of power and framed detention without trial as a symbol of freedom's limits in the postcolonial state. Setting the stage for the years ahead, the government's use of confinement was thus not only a key method for managing dissent but also a driving force for dissent.

5 ~ “Dungeons,” Disappearance, and Detention

Punishment during the Amin Years

WALKING INTO his office at Radio Uganda on February 15, 1977, WodOkello Lawoko was confronted by men holding pistols and submachine guns.¹ Within a few minutes, he had been arrested on charges of treason. For 196 days, Lawoko was held in the basement of a building in Nakasero, a lush residential neighborhood in Kampala.² This basement, which Lawoko characterized as a “dungeon,” was part of the infamous headquarters of the State Research Bureau (SRB), arguably Amin’s most feared paramilitary agency. In his memoir, Lawoko recalls the horrific environment of his cell: “There were blood soaked shirts, torn bloodstained trousers, bits of human bone, excrement. . . . All were the belongings and remains of people that were no more. The walls were all blood stained and in some places human brain tissue and dung was sprayed, confirming the types of treatment previous occupants had received. Apparently sometimes the dead were left in the cell for days on end. . . . The odour was that of death itself.”³

Nakasero was not an official prison but rather one of the numerous informal sites of confinement used by the Amin regime to detain, torture,

and kill perceived enemies. Detention occurred in many places—including private residences, luxury hotels, and military barracks—creating a covert cartography of terror outside of the formal government prison system. Paramilitary organizations such as the SRB ran these sites, which were ironically known as “safe houses.” Along with public executions and the widespread disappearance of Ugandans, these detention sites are one of the most enduring symbols of the violence of the Amin years. Throughout the 1970s, newspaper headlines such as “Dungeon Visit Yields Latest Amin Horrors” shocked international audiences with tales of brutality.⁴ Accounts of these sites were also used by Ugandan exiles calling for Amin’s overthrow. In an address to members of the House International Relations Committee in the United States, for example, Remigius Kintu of the Committee of Uganda decried Amin’s use of what he called “concentration camps,” in which detainees were treated “in some of the most barbaric ways this world has seen since Hitler’s time.”⁵ Lawoko’s *Dungeons of Nakasero* is one of several memoirs of detention, joining others such as Wycliffe Kat’s *Escape from Idi Amin’s Slaughterhouse*.⁶ Today, Lubiri Barracks—the detention site adjacent to Mengo Palace—is a popular tourist attraction for visitors to Kampala. Through the Lonely Planet’s travel website, one can browse tours to Lubiri alongside safaris and local pub crawls, reflecting the ways in which Uganda’s history has been commodified for an international audience. Seeking to entice visitors, the website offers the following description of the tour: “Guides will lead you to this terrifying site, a dark concrete tunnel with numerous dark, damp cells, which were separated by an electrified passage of water to prevent escape.”⁷ Lubiri is one of the few spaces left in which to reflect upon and mourn victims of state-sponsored violence, something that is often lost as tourists seek shock and entertainment.

This chapter examines the Amin regime’s use of detention and incarceration, situating this in relation to other forms of state punishment. It draws upon the oral histories of former detainees, prison staff, and government officials; memoirs; and investigations such as the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights (CIVHR). During Amin’s rule, detention without trial was systematically used against a wide range of Ugandans. Intensifying a practice begun by Obote, Amin further untethered detention and state violence from any form of legality or oversight, instead allowing military and paramilitary agents to act with impunity. While the Amin state still used government prisons, safe houses were the preferred sites for punishing and eliminating perceived opponents of the regime. Detainees were not brought there simply as a way of restricting their freedom but rather for further punishment, including torture and often brutal extrajudicial killings. Despite

the horror of these sites, there are incredible stories of resistance and friendship among the detainees. While scholars have shown how prisoners and detainees forged communities in extreme circumstances elsewhere on the continent, such as in camps and prisons in Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, there has not been much work on this in the Ugandan context.⁸ Some survivors have bravely shared their stories through memoirs and testimonies, creating an archive of the state's repression and paying tribute to those whose lives were lost. Many of the bodies of those killed by the state were never recovered, denying families closure, while survivors were left with the trauma of what they had experienced and witnessed.

Along with examining the use and experiences of safe houses, this chapter also analyzes the representations and realities of Uganda Prisons Service (UPS) prisons in this period. While aspects of UPS during the Amin years are explored in chapter 2, this chapter focuses instead on how the violence of military rule shaped the prison system. It shows how the Amin state undermined the independence of UPS in this period by bringing military and paramilitary agents into prisons. District government prisons were also impacted to a degree, particularly after the merger in 1977, but less so than UPS. As the regime sought to exert further control over UPS, many officers were killed by the state, including two commissioners of prisons and many other senior leaders who were seen as barriers to the state's agenda. As had been the case during the Obote I years, detainees were also held in government prisons, particularly Luzira. While safe houses were more widely used for this purpose, detainees were brought to UPS prisons if their lives were to be spared. Here, they faced difficult conditions and often physical violence. Reflecting the extreme circumstances of the time, however, many detainees expressed relief when they arrived at Luzira, as this signaled that the state had decided to spare them from systematic torture and death. UPS thus played a complex role during military rule, at once both complicit in and resistant to the violence of the Amin state.

PUNISHMENT AND PRISONS DURING THE AMIN YEARS

Amin's takeover brought with it the unchecked power of the military within the state. This was made explicitly clear with his first official decree, issued shortly after the coup. It established the "Defence Council," which was composed of Amin, the chiefs of staff for the army and the air force, and any other persons whom they deemed fit to appoint.⁹ It became "the only effective decision-making body in Uganda," assuming more power than Amin's ministers.¹⁰ Soon after, Amin issued another decree declaring that all future decrees would be "promulgated by the military head of state, head of the

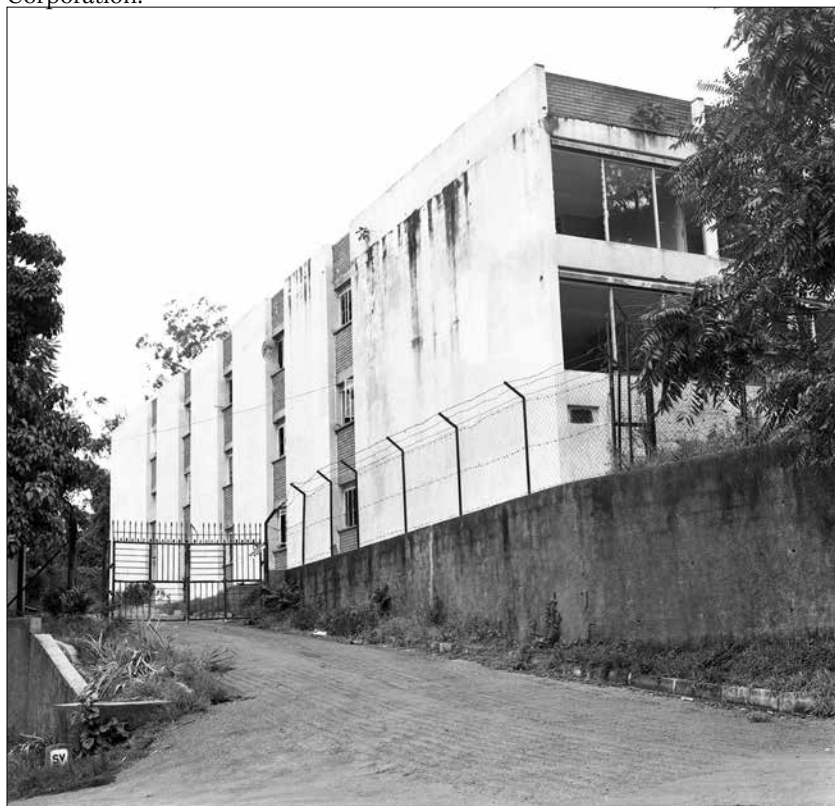
government and commander-in-chief of the armed forces.” As a result, he placed “full legislative, executive and military powers” in his own hands.¹¹

Having established the military’s dominance, Amin began enhancing his power through a series of executive decrees, building on some of the practices of the Obote I regime. On March 13, 1971, Amin passed the Detention (Prescription of Time Limit) Decree.¹² This legalized the detention of anyone who had been held during the coup as well as former General Service Unit personnel for up to six months.¹³ In September, this was extended by an additional three months.¹⁴ Such detentions were meant to be published in the *Gazette* “from time to time”—a deliberately vague benchmark that resulted in a lack of transparency regarding detentions.¹⁵ Next came the Armed Forces (Powers of Arrest) Decree, which gave soldiers or prison officers the power to “arrest any person whom he suspects on reasonable grounds of having committed or being about to commit,” offenses against “public order,” people, or property.¹⁶ Along with further expanding the scope of the military, this also marked a key shift in the conception of prison officers’ work, as they had hitherto only been involved in receiving, rather than arresting, those facing charges. According to the CIVHR, however, prison officers did not use this power “to the detriment of the people or at all.”¹⁷ As is discussed later in this chapter, the CIVHR was much more critical of the military, the police, and the paramilitary organizations than it was of UPS. In 1972, Amin passed further decrees that changed the landscape of punishment in Uganda. These included the Robbery Suspects Decree 1972 (No. 7 of 1972), through which a security officer could “use any force” deemed “necessary” to ensure the arrest of someone who had or was “about to commit” a robbery. In practice, this meant that those labeled as robbers could be shot on sight.¹⁸ Amin also announced the Proceedings against the Government (Protection) Decree in 1972.¹⁹ This rendered government officials immune to prosecution for “anything done or omitted to be done for the purpose of maintaining public order or public security,” in “defence of Uganda,” or for the “enforcement of discipline or law and order.”²⁰ Together, these and many other decrees empowered the security organs of the Amin state to arrest, detain, and kill people at will without fear of legal repercussions.

While these decrees may appear to have enhanced the power of the Police Force and UPS, these institutions were undercut by Amin’s new paramilitary organizations and the military.²¹ Intensifying the practice begun by Obote, Amin moved the locus of power into the hands of new agencies that operated outside the scope of the Public Service Commission. The State Research Bureau, created in June 1971 to replace the General Service Unit was the most notorious.²² It did not have a “constitutional nor a statutory basis,”

and its “ultimate head” was Amin himself.²³ One interviewee described the State Research agents as “gods [un]to themselves, they were not answerable to nobody.”²⁴ Wycliffe Kato, a former public servant of the Amin regime who was detained in this period, said the SRB’s mission was to “eliminate, by the most brutal methods possible, all Amin’s enemies.”²⁵ The organization was designed to gather intelligence for the regime, especially when it came to identifying potential dissidents.²⁶ It had approximately two thousand agents, many of whom were drawn from outside of Uganda.²⁷ They were far from inconspicuous, known for their flashy dress and vehicles.²⁸ In his novel *Snakepit*, Moses Isegawa effectively captures the imposing presence of the SRB agents on Kampala’s streets in the 1970s. “State Research Bureau boys,” he writes, “were prominently displaying bell-bottom trousers wide as tents, platform shoes high as ladders, silver sunglasses shiny as chrome and walkie-talkies bulky as phone booths. . . . They made this look like another city, compared with the earlier Kampala—accursed, dirty, haunted.”²⁹ The

FIGURE 5.1. Nakasero State Research Centre, 1980. Uganda Broadcasting Corporation.



agents' over-the-top appearance was no accident but rather symbolic of the performative nature of terror in the Amin years. As Alicia Decker argues, "Terror was most useful to the regime when its results were publicly known, since it paralyzed protest and silenced opposition."³⁰ SRB agents were widely recognized, yet they evaded the boundaries of official visibility, as they did not wear uniforms. Rather, they occupied a liminal space, serving as agents of Amin rather than members of the formal state bureaucracy. A similar paradox of the visible and the covert characterized their headquarters: the building in Nakasero was an infamous landmark from which nearby residents reported hearing screams, but it was closed off to all but the SRB agents and detainees.³¹

Many memoirs of Amin-era detainees include an encounter with these ostentatiously dressed agents at their home or workplace, which was usually followed by arrest and detention in Nakasero. James Kahigiriza, former chairman of the Uganda Land Commission, narrated one such incident: "On 15 February 1977, at about 10.00 o'clock in the morning, three young men came to my office opposite the parliamentary buildings. They wore dark glasses and high-heeled boots. . . . My captors led me from the second floor of the building, down to the pavement at the ministry's parking yard, where their car was waiting. When they opened the door of the back seat for me to enter, I saw machine guns on the floor of the car. It was then that I realised I was heading for slaughter."³² Kahigiriza was indeed taken to Nakasero, but he was ultimately released after less than a month in detention.³³ This came as a tremendous "surprise" to him, as many of his government colleagues had been killed there.³⁴ Unlike the highly publicized releases during Amin's first year in power, detainees at Nakasero and other sites were often abruptly let go without ceremony or explanation. When Kahigiriza was being released, the SRB agents said nothing more to him other than "You are going but what you have seen here, leave it here."³⁵ This order echoed the motto allegedly inscribed on the walls of Nakasero: "Secret what you do here, secret what you leave here."³⁶

The Public Safety Unit (PSU) was another organization that carried out arrests, detentions, and extrajudicial killings. According to the evidence of one former commander, it was composed of approximately one thousand uniformed and plainclothes police officers from the Criminal Investigation Department.³⁷ Created in November of 1971, its ostensible purpose was to tackle *kondoism*, or armed robbery. According to Andrew Kayiira, a former UPS officer who wrote a thesis on the subject, this term came from the Luganda word *akakondo*, or "door latch," and thus referred to "those who hit door latches"—a reference to breaking into a home.³⁸ First identified as a

problem in the 1950s, it had been used by the Obote I state as a cover for cracking down on opposition.³⁹ The same was true of the Amin years.⁴⁰ In the view of the CIVHR, the PSU was “synonymous with the torture and murder of detainees.”⁴¹ Its agents were given the freedom to shoot those suspected of *kondoism* on sight or bring them to their headquarters in Naguru, another Kampala neighborhood.⁴² Today, this area is still home to the headquarters of the Uganda Police and is thus a space that, for many Ugandans, evokes memories of the Amin regime’s violence.

Although formally part of the Police Force, the PSU operated entirely outside of its normal parameters. When asked about the PSU’s relationship to the Police Force, Michael (pseudonym), a former officer in the Criminal Investigation Department, commented in an interview, “They were different from us.” Laughing nervously, he continued, “They were sent to arrest people, and a lot of things . . .” trailing off without giving further details, perhaps uncomfortable about discussing the violence that accompanied these arrests and their aftermath. Instead, Michael focused on how Amin’s regime had treated the Uganda Police, noting that Amin’s security forces “used to call us women,” which, in this context, was viewed as an insult.⁴³ Decker’s work has also shown how the police were characterized as “weak” women by other security agencies at this time, inscribing the gendered division of power that was present in Amin’s state.⁴⁴ Of all the security organizations, the police appear to have been the most profoundly undermined by the Amin regime. One former minister remarked that they had been “rendered powerless,”⁴⁵ while the Public Service Commission declared that the Police Force was “shattered” over the course of the 1970s.⁴⁶ In Michael’s view, this was because of their public-facing role. Referring to the relationship between the military and the police, he remarked, “They meet very much. But with the prisons they send their people, their accused people,” thus coming into limited contact with other organizations or the public. In Michael’s view, the “closed fences” of UPS protected it from some of the more damaging interactions with the military.⁴⁷

Along with the SRB and PSU, there was also the Military Police. First created by Obote in 1967, the unit was designed to monitor and manage soldiers’ behavior.⁴⁸ During the 1960s, it was controlled by some of Amin’s most loyal followers, many from his home region of West Nile.⁴⁹ Following the coup, Amin maintained this body, using it to further entrench the dominant position of the military. The Military Police had a broader scope than the PSU but were similarly engaged in the harassment, torture, and murder of civilians and soldiers. Throughout the 1970s, they were responsible for detaining and murdering perceived opponents at Makindye

Military Prison, one of the most infamous safe houses. Despite its name, neither the military nor UPS ran this site. It was known for the “Singapore” execution cell, named after the country that Obote was visiting when Amin’s coup took place.⁵⁰

Accounts of these organizations and their abuses mostly come from survivors, whose stories can be found in reports by organizations such as Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists, along with detainees’ memoirs and the testimonies in the CIVHR. Survivors took their role as witnesses seriously. Lawoko presented his memoir as a “document of the facts as I have witnessed them,” while James Kahigiriza wrote about how he felt that God had allowed him to survive so as to be a “witness to what had taken place” at Nakasero.⁵¹ Like any memoir or oral testimony, these accounts are subjective and partial, but their very existence is an important act of resistance against the processes of erasure carried out by the Amin state.⁵² Unsurprisingly, there are virtually no traces of the SRB or other paramilitary organizations in the official archives. However, in the crowded records room at Central Police Station, one can find police reports documenting the experiences of those terrorized by Amin’s agents. There is, for example, a complaint from a man who claimed that SRB personnel had assaulted him and his family at their home for hiding a photo of Amin.⁵³ In another, a woman described how SRB agents accused her of stealing, demanded a bribe, and warned her that she would not come back alive if she was taken to Nakasero.⁵⁴ Such reports provide a rare record of Amin’s paramilitary organizations and the violence and terror they inflicted upon Ugandans. These documents also reflect the efforts of Ugandans to hold the state accountable for its violence, likely at great personal risk to themselves.

These three paramilitary groups, along with the military itself, carried out much of the violence of the Amin years. The next section discusses detention in greater detail, but it is worth first briefly examining the Amin state’s wider punitive practices. Much like in Argentina or Chile during the 1970s, many Ugandans “disappeared” during Amin’s dictatorship.⁵⁵ Individuals targeted by the regime would be picked up by one of Amin’s paramilitary agencies and either taken to a detention site or killed right away. No one and nowhere was safe, with Ugandans of all backgrounds disappearing from “offices, cinemas, highways, homes.”⁵⁶ Their families often knew nothing about their fate, instead being forced to embark upon painful and often futile searches for loved ones. It did not take long for Ugandans and foreign observers to raise the alarm about what was happening, pushing the Amin state to respond. In 1974, Amin created the Commission of Inquiry into the Disappearances of People in Uganda.⁵⁷ The report—which was over

eight hundred pages long—had little immediate impact, as the regime never made it accessible to the public. Now that it is available, however, it provides evidence of hundreds of disappearances that occurred at the hands of the Amin state. The report includes testimonies from family members who courageously came forward despite the risks of doing so during military rule. The commission ultimately heard from 545 witnesses. This number, however, does not represent the full extent or impact of disappearances during these years. Indeed, part of the utility of disappearance was its unknowability. “Disappearance,” Decker writes, “was a calculated ruling strategy and not simply an unfortunate consequence of military rule.”⁵⁸ What we do know, however, is that the extent of these disappearances was so significant that Amin had to provide legal recourse for families through the Estate of Missing Persons (Management) Decree in 1973. Under this edict, people were considered “disappeared” if they had not been in contact with their families for six months, at which point family members could apply to take over the estate of the disappeared person.⁵⁹

While disappearance led to a death rendered invisible by the state, Amin’s regime also purposefully carried out killings in public view. Under the military government, public executions—usually at the hands of firing squads—became spaces in which punishment and the display of state power intersected in a highly visible and brutal manner. These executions were ordered by military tribunals, which had been established through the Trial by Military Tribunals Decree in June of 1973.⁶⁰ Consequently, soldiers and civilians could be tried by military tribunals, which were made up of members of the armed forces and appointed by the Defence Council.⁶¹ As mentioned earlier, there was also the Economic Crimes Tribunal Decree of 1975, which made crimes such as smuggling or overcharging punishable by death.⁶²

While not all these executions were carried out in public, some were deliberately designed as public spectacles. In January and February of 1973, for instance, the Amin regime carried out a series of public executions in six different towns across the country, including Kabale, Mbale, and Kampala.⁶³ Most of the twelve men killed were alleged guerrillas who had been involved in a failed invasion attempt.⁶⁴ According to *Drum* magazine, Amin had made a chilling order that the men be executed in their home districts, “so that everyone, including his parents, can see.”⁶⁵ Large crowds attended these events: there were reportedly three thousand people watching in Kabale, twenty thousand in Mbale, and thirty thousand in Kampala.⁶⁶ An article in the *Voice of Uganda* boasted about the size of these crowds, stating that “the executions were witnessed by thousands of people who travelled from near and far.”⁶⁷ The article’s subheading, “Stern Warning to Others,” underscored

the intention behind these executions: to instill fear in the public and undermine resistance to the regime.⁶⁸ That same year, over ten thousand people gathered in Tororo to witness the execution of Sergeant Baru, who had been found guilty of murder. He was shot by a firing squad. As was the case with so many executions, the Photographic Section of the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation was there to capture the entire process, underscoring how these executions were seen by the regime as an opportunity to document and demonstrate its power.⁶⁹

The most infamous public execution occurred four years later. Known as the “Clock Tower” execution because it occurred near a large standing clock in downtown Kampala, it took place on the afternoon of September 9, 1977. The twelve accused men had been convicted of treason by a military tribunal. They came from a range of professional backgrounds, including teaching, policing, and business. Three of them were senior UPS officers: John Kabandize, a senior superintendent of prisons; E. N. Mutabazi, the superintendent of prisons in Kampala; and Peter Atua, a principal officer at Murchison Bay.⁷⁰ One of the men who was acquitted, John Edward Ejura, testified that all the accused were held in Nakasero and had been forced to write false confessions stating their involvement in a plot to overthrow the government.⁷¹ Writing about the day of the execution in his memoir, Robeson Engur—a soldier in the Obote II period whose father was disappeared by the Amin regime—reflected upon the atmosphere in downtown Kampala at the time.⁷² “By about four o’clock,” he writes, “it had become a mammoth crowd and soldiers were everywhere at the ground.”⁷³ The condemned men were then “frogmarched into the ground where the firing squad was waiting. They were led out under armed escort and they all had hoods covering their heads and faces.” Engur remembers the crowd being in a “state of disbelief” after it was over: “It was hard to comprehend that, twelve men, who were some people’s fathers had just been murdered in a matter of seconds.”⁷⁴ Isaac (pseudonym), who traveled with the condemned men to the execution site in his capacity as a UPS chaplain, remembered that day as the “most challenging time” in his career. With considerable sadness, he recalled, “People you have worked with are being executed, and some of them you are fully aware that they are innocent.”⁷⁵

Through executions and disappearances, the Amin regime strategically utilized both visibility and invisibility to terrorize the Ugandan population. During this period, death at the hands of the state became a regular occurrence. Detention, in this environment, shifted from being a form of punishment on its own to primarily being a precursor to other forms of punishment, including torture and death.

"DUNGEONS" AND "SLAUGHTERHOUSES":
DETENTION UNDER MILITARY RULE

Makindye, Naguru, and Nakasero are remembered as the epicenters of the Amin regime's brutality. While testifying to the CIVHR, Henry Kayondo, the former president of the Uganda Law Society, singled out these spaces as being host to the worst abuses of the 1970s. "The violations of human rights, some of them never appeared in courts," he insisted; "they were committed in Naguru, they were committed in 'Singapore' cell [in Makindye], they were committed up there in State Research."⁷⁶ Beyond these three, however, there were numerous other safe houses, including military barracks, police stations, hotel rooms, and private homes.⁷⁷ Informal detention sites were mostly concentrated in Kampala and the central region, but they were also scattered throughout the country.

Of all the safe houses, Nakasero State Research Centre is arguably the most notorious. In a recent exhibition on the Amin years in the Uganda Museum, a photo of Nakasero appears towards the end of the photographic display, serving as a haunting symbol of the regime's brutality.⁷⁸ Located in a wealthy neighborhood that had been popular among British settlers, the building sat next to a children's day care center and All Saints Cathedral.⁷⁹ It was three stories in total and appeared to have at least six different cells.⁸⁰ When they first arrived, detainees described being held in different parts of the building. They initially went into the reception area on the ground floor, where all their belongings were taken, never to be returned.⁸¹ Wycliffe Kato, the former assistant director general of Civil Aviation, was initially held in a cell on the ground floor, along with an older woman who had been brought in for smuggling. This appeared to be a cell where mostly female detainees were held.⁸² According to Kato's cellmate, it was a place where "people were tortured . . . women were raped and others killed."⁸³ On his first night, Kato was himself assaulted. "At about 8:30pm three men came into the cell," he recalled, including two who had arrested him at Entebbe airport earlier. One of them, Kato said, "beat me up without troubling to ask what wrong I had done."⁸⁴ The next night, he was taken upstairs to another cell, known as Cell 5. The cell across the hallway, Cell 6, was occupied by a woman. The window in Kato's cell had a view of the surrounding neighborhood, and, looking out the window, he dreamed of freedom. "I watched some birds flying and like all prisoners everywhere wished that I could fly, too. When I saw some butterflies, I envied them because they had the freedom I was being denied."⁸⁵ Later that night, while struggling to sleep on the bare floor of his cell, handcuffed for the first time in his life, he heard sounds of torture and the screams of its victims nearby.⁸⁶ After spending his first two nights in



FIGURE 5.2. Nakasero cell, 1980. Uganda Broadcasting Corporation.

these cells, Kato was taken down to the basement, where he remained for the rest of his detention.

Nakasero's basement was the primary place of confinement for detainees. Unlike Kato, James Kahigiriza was immediately taken to the basement, pushed inside what he described as a "dark virtually airless corridor" that "looked like a long narrow tunnel leading to nowhere."⁸⁷ Detainees were often held in this hallway space, along with two cells on either side of the hallway.⁸⁸ The first, on the righthand side, was known as C1. This cell was used to hold detainees who were going to be killed. As Lawoko recalls, "C1 was a cell for the condemned. . . . The veteran prisoners among us had never seen anyone come back down again after being taken from it."⁸⁹ It was, according to George Kasozi, a lawyer who was also detained at Nakasero in the 1970s, meant to hold fifteen to twenty people but instead held over a hundred, who were "packed like sardines." Like Lawoko, his strongest impressions of the cell were visceral: "It was so filthy, because there were no toilets, there was

a bucket towards the extreme end of the prison cell, where people relieved nature, and it was terrible, the stench was terrible.”⁹⁰ Cell 2, or C2, was on the left-hand side of the basement. It was, according to Kato, fifteen by ten meters and had ventilators that would let in the rain, flooding the cell. All the detainees in this cell were handcuffed, whereas those in C1 were not.⁹¹

Interrogation, torture, and murder were aspects of daily life in Nakasero, as well as extreme physical discomfort, unsanitary conditions, and illness. The detainees were not given any sort of bedding or clothing, remaining in what they had worn on the day of their arrest. The cells were incredibly hot, described by Kahigiriza as a “warm oven,” and were also infested with fleas and lice.⁹² Food was irregular and frequently made detainees sick.⁹³ Those who were ill or injured were given no medical attention, including one of Kato’s cellmates, Pilot Officer Cadet Nicodemus Kasujja Majwala, who had lost his leg after being shot during his arrest and was in significant pain.⁹⁴ One of the most terrifying moments for detainees was when they were brought upstairs, the main site for torture and murder. In his memoir, Lawoko recounts how SRB guards—instructed by senior agents to give the detainees their *ki-kopo ya chai*, or a “cup of tea”—carried out whippings upstairs to encourage detainees to confess to fabricated crimes.⁹⁵ Others were killed. The murder of condemned people often took place at night, with detainees awakening to see “armed men with sledgehammers, crowbars and bayonets,” a few of the weapons most commonly used by the SRB agents.⁹⁶ At times, SRB agents would simply open fire in the basement, killing detainees en masse.⁹⁷ Some of the most prominent victims of the Amin regime were reportedly killed in Nakasero, including Archbishop Janani Luwum, who appears in many survivors’ memoirs.⁹⁸ Kahigiriza described Luwum’s appearance in the basement of Nakasero as “the most shocking thing I have ever experienced in my life,” as he could not believe the head of the Anglican Church in Uganda had been treated in this way.⁹⁹

Survivors’ stories provide insight into the terrifying environment within Nakasero’s walls, but they also reflect the camaraderie and ethic of care between the detainees. In his memoir, Kato recalls how many of his fellow detainees showed him tremendous “kindness” when he first arrived.¹⁰⁰ This began with the older woman on his first night who comforted him and told him to “be brave.”¹⁰¹ Hopeful that one of them would leave Nakasero alive, they exchanged messages to share with each other’s families.¹⁰² When he was shifted to Cell 5 the next night, Kato spoke to the woman held in Cell 6 across the hallway, and she advised him to use a beer bottle in his cell to relieve himself, providing him with a degree of dignity in impossible circumstances.¹⁰³ It was in Cell 2, however, where Kato forged

the closest relationships, as he lived with these men for several weeks. They distracted themselves from their situation by playing draughts (checkers) with discarded beer bottle caps and prayed together multiple times a day.¹⁰⁴ Kahigiriza, Kasozi, and Lawoko also discussed the importance of prayer in their memoirs. "In order to endure our ordeal," Kahigiriza wrote, "we had to pray every day and night."¹⁰⁵ The detainees reportedly had "respect for everyone's religion," and Christians and Muslims would often pray together and for each other.¹⁰⁶

The detainees also sought ways to resist their situation. For some, this came in the form of the "diaries" on one of the walls of C1. Located at the "far end of the cell," this space was used by detainees to make their presence known, creating an archive that was both haunting and a mark of their refusal to "disappear" at the hands of the state.¹⁰⁷ Recalling this practice, Lawoko wrote, "Inscribed on the wall with whatever material that was available at a given time, were names and dates. . . . Everyday when a captive awoke to find himself still blessed with life, he would daringly walk through the awful mess to register his existence," hoping that "some one may be able to let out the records for people on the outside to know of their fate."¹⁰⁸ Along with the diaries, the detainees also found ways to mitigate some of the discomforts imposed upon them. Kato recalled how Kasujja, the detainee who had lost his leg, made a tool out of the discarded materials in their cell that could unlock handcuffs. Each night, the detainees in C2 would unlock each other's handcuffs in order to sleep more freely; then they would then put them back on in the morning. This was, Kato explained, "a small but vital triumph" for the detainees, explaining that "none of the guards ever knew about, or even suspected, our achievement."¹⁰⁹ One of the most dramatic acts of resistance was orchestrated in this cell by Kato and his fellow inmates, who successfully executed a plan to escape from Nakasero. Each day, with Kasujja standing watch, the other detainees would work with discarded materials in the cell to construct devices that could help them escape through the ventilator. In a remarkable display of ingenuity and bravery that made international headlines, most of the detainees not only escaped Nakasero but also managed to flee Uganda, some walking more than 450 miles to reach the border.¹¹⁰

While less is known about the other safe houses, they too were sites of torture and murder. Makindye Military Prison, located on one of the hills upon which Kampala sits, was similarly notorious, used by both the Amin and the Obote II regimes. Those who survived detention there in the 1970s recounted the horror of "Singapore" cell, in which detainees were subjected to particularly perverse forms of torture, including being forced to kill each

other with hammers.¹¹¹ Testifying to the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), former minister Joshua Wakholi described his experience in Makindye. Following the brutal murder of an entire cell of prisoners, Wakholi and the others were ordered to clean out the cell. “In fact, I think the dried blood that was on the floor was almost a quarter of an inch thick,” he remarked, “and the whole place was full of pieces of skull bones, teeth, brain tissue and many other pieces of flesh from human beings.”¹¹² It was here that Benedicto Kiwanuka, Amin’s chief justice, is believed to have been murdered.¹¹³

Naguru, the home of the Public Safety Unit, was another feared killing site. Testifying to the CIVHR, former superintendent of police Mathias Ntambi expressed his disgust at the “inhuman” tortures carried out there, characterizing it as a “section purposely formed for extracting information from people arrested [but] not going through the normal police procedure.”¹¹⁴ In a report on human rights in Uganda, Amnesty International provided a list of torture techniques at Naguru, which included being “beaten with a rhino hide whip,” various forms of sexual abuse, and “wheel torture,” which involved having one’s head stuck inside a wheel rim while it was beaten with iron bars.¹¹⁵

Although Naguru, Makindye, and Nakasero feature the most prominently in accounts of the Amin regime, other sites are also mentioned. Mutukula Military Prison, located near the border with Tanzania, gained its infamy early on in the 1970s as the site of the “Mutukula Massacre.”¹¹⁶ In December 1971, over four hundred Langi and Acholi soldiers held in Luzira were moved to Mutukula and killed en masse.¹¹⁷ They were targeted due to their perceived loyalty to Obote. Former detainee James Namakajo, who was held in multiple detention sites during the 1970s and 1980s, characterized Mutukula as a symbol of “the worst that man can do in this world.” He said, “I have seen the skeletons that are scattered across our country . . . but I would like to emphasize that Mutukula in my mind symbolizes callousness of a very different nature.”¹¹⁸ Originally built as a prison farm under UPS during the colonial period, Mutukula appears to be the only prison farm that was temporarily taken over by the army.¹¹⁹

Often, individuals picked up by Amin’s security organizations went to multiple detention sites. George Kasozi, a lawyer who was detained for praying at a church that had been banned by Amin, was taken to three places over the course of his detention experience.¹²⁰ His story not only illustrates how detainees were often moved around but also provides insight into the conditions for these detainees at Luzira, who were called “lodgers” because they had no legal status.¹²¹ After SRB agents arrested Kasozi and his fellow churchgoers, they were immediately brought to Nakasero, where they

remained for twenty-four hours. The group was then taken to Central Police Station and held in a truck in the parking lot for approximately seven hours.¹²² Ultimately, Kasozi ended up at Luzira. “We thought we were going to be taken to Namanve,” he said, referring to a forest in the Kampala area. “That’s where they used to dump the bodies after killing them . . . but luckily, they took us to Luzira Maximum Security Prison.”¹²³ When they first arrived, Kasozi and his fellow detainees were “assaulted,” with guards hitting them with sticks and “metallic objects,” as well as kicking them with “their hard prison boots.”¹²⁴ They “would cane us, literally slash our bottoms, slash our backs, they would beat us so hard,” he commented.¹²⁵ This “ritual” was reportedly “performed on every new incoming inmate” at this time. Most of these officers, he explained, were “people close to Amin,” referring to those who had been born in West Nile District. Overall, Kasozi described this experience as “degrading and inhumane.”¹²⁶ After being beaten, the group was then met by Mohammed Ruzigala, who was said to oversee Luzira at the time. Ruzigala sought to absolve himself of complicity in their treatment, insisting that he was just a “custodian.”¹²⁷ According to the CIVHR, Ruzigala was an active member of the SRB who played a leading role in the “infiltration” of UPS during the 1970s.¹²⁸

Following their brutal arrival into the prison, Kasozi and the other detainees were taken to their cell. There were no mats or blankets. “Being an official prison bearing the national colours at the entrance, it should have provided at least mats of locally made carpets for sleeping on,” Kasozi wrote in his memoir with disgust.¹²⁹ After an uncomfortable sleep on the bare floor, the detainees were woken up early so that the guards could count them, a routine practice throughout UPS prisons, and they were then served “porridge without sugar,” prepared by convicted prisoners.¹³⁰ As in Nakasero, the food was of very poor quality, often making them sick. They sought comfort through prayer and song, as well as through occasional visitors, including an Anglican chaplain.¹³¹ The detainees also began to build relationships with the prison staff, most of whom, Kasozi indicated, were “very kind, sociable towards us and respectful.”¹³² In contrast to their first night at Luzira, most of their experiences with the staff were positive: “They became more friendly, they realized we were not hostile. . . . Some had been misinformed that we were criminals, but after interviewing us they realized no, we were just church people . . . and so they in fact felt for us. . . . So they started to treat us well.” This included some of the officers from West Nile, who would update Kasozi and other detainees about the government’s latest plan for them. When it appeared that they were going to be executed, he recalled one of these officers coming to them and saying, “People, please *pray*—pray

that God intervenes.” After three months, Kasozi and his group were suddenly pardoned by Amin and released.¹³³

Overall, his time in Luzira changed his view of public servants in the Amin regime. “I realized that all people are not bad,” Kasozi commented. “Everybody who worked for the system was not evil. Some of them were there because they were looking for a living. Not that they were prepared to work for the perpetuation of the regime.”¹³⁴ Kasozi’s experience thus reflects the changing and complex realities of UPS at this time. In some cases, officers were carrying out physical violence against the detainees, and, in others, they were shocked at the abuses of the regime and treated the detainees well. Generally, the worst treatment came from the SRB agents who were working in the prisons.

For many others, detention ended not with a transfer to Luzira but rather with death. Discursive representations of Nakasero focus on the killing that ensued within its walls. In his memoir, Kato characterized it as a “slaughterhouse,” while Kasozi called it “a prison of no return.”¹³⁵ Two of the individuals whom I interviewed said they had lost family members who had been detained. Henry Kyemba—who had served as Amin’s minister of health before fleeing the country in 1977—recalled how his “relatives were picked up and taken to informal [detention] places,” despite his status as a government official.¹³⁶ One of his brothers was killed at the PSU headquarters in Naguru. For Robeson Engur, who was later imprisoned in Luzira following Obote’s overthrow in 1985, the experience of incarceration transcended generations. In his memoir, he recalls how his father—Yokosofati Engur—had first been imprisoned by the colonial government in the 1950s for his involvement in nationalist politics, and he was imprisoned again in 1975 in Luzira following his career as a government minister. Although Robeson said that his father did not discuss these experiences frequently, he indicated that Yokosofati was “treated very well” at Luzira in contrast to his own experiences of detention.¹³⁷ Robeson goes on to describe the seizure of his father in 1977, when SRB agents arrived at their family property in Lira and took Yokosofati away. This was not unexpected, Robeson explained, describing the town as a “human abattoir” at the time due to its association with Obote, who was from the wider Lango region, which included Lira.¹³⁸ Years later, with the publication of Lawoko’s memoir, Robeson learned the details of his father’s fate. For the Engur family, the wall “diaries” in C1 confirmed Yokosofati was held in Nakasero for four days before being killed.¹³⁹

As these accounts suggest, experiences of captivity differed depending on whether one was put into a safe house or a UPS prison. The distinction

between these sites was reinforced by former detainees, government officials, and legal professionals during interviews. Discussing Nakasero, George Kasozi commented, “It was a detention facility. It wasn’t a prison. Because it was not gazetted. It was an informal, sort of detention, where the state had their killing machine. Because, they were just killing people in there, executing people.” In contrast, he stated, “Luzira is a system whereby the state acknowledges that these offenders have been tried, they have gone through the due process of law, they’ve been sentenced and they’ve been kept at this facility.”¹⁴⁰ To Kasozi, UPS prisons were, on some levels, bound by rules and therefore offered some protection to prisoners, while the detention sites were lawless and became sites of atrocities. Echoing this distinction, Henry Kyemba characterized the safe houses as the sites where “most of the tortures, the greatest deprivation took place, where people were held,” whereas he described UPS as “professional.”¹⁴¹ Although Kyemba’s account may be met with more cynicism given his status as a government official, he fled Uganda during the Amin years and wrote one of the most famous critical accounts of the regime. Similarly, former detainee James Namakajo—a journalist who had worked for the General Service Unit and later the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting—described the conditions at Luzira as “fabulous” in comparison to Makindye Military Prison.¹⁴² For many Ugandans, from former detainees to government officials, the boundary between informal detention and incarceration in a government prison often meant the difference between life and death. This does not erase the violence that occurred within UPS, but it does reflect the fact that the regime used sites of confinement strategically for different purposes.

Not unexpectedly, prison officers also drew clear boundaries between UPS and the safe houses in their retrospective accounts. The majority used these sites as a foil to emphasize UPS’s professionalism in this period. “Most people wanted to go to Luzira, because at least there, there was a humane approach,” Joseph Etima remarked. “But if you went to the State Research,” he continued, “the conditions were terrible.”¹⁴³ Offering a similar refrain, Luke (pseudonym) insisted that the “standard for the Prisons Service was different” from the informal detention sites, remarking that “those who were dropped in prisons were the lucky ones.”¹⁴⁴ These characterizations again have a clear self-serving element, as they are tied to officers’ professional status. Yet, these officers’ accounts in many ways align with those from those outside UPS, including former detainees.

This view is also reflected in the CIVHR’s findings. Ultimately, the CIVHR declared that there was “hardly any evidence” that “government Civil Prisons were centres of torture. On the contrary, many detainees

considered that a transfer from military barracks to for instance, Luzira, was to be saved from death.”¹⁴⁵ In the estimation of the CIVHR, this could in part be explained by the prison staff themselves:

Evidence indicates that the staff of the Prisons Service were not as involved in the human rights abuses as were the military, intelligence organization, and some Police sections. . . . They appear to be more disciplined than the personnel of the other armed services. Many reasons explain this, some of which were that Prisons personnel carry out their functions inside closed fences, outside public view, they only deal with prisoners and have little contact with the general public; they appear to be more disciplined than the personnel of the other services.¹⁴⁶

This statement hinges on the idea of a professional boundary, one embodied in “closed fences” and abstractly represented by notions of an institution that was “disciplined” compared to other security organizations. As the “fences” reference suggests, boundaries have always been fundamental to the concept and practice of a prison, which is premised on the need to create a physical distance between free and unfree members of society. Yet in the commission’s report, boundaries acquired a much greater significance, allegedly transcending their custodial function to act as a buffer against the incursions of a military state. This is overstated. As is explored further in the next section, the military and paramilitary organizations were heavily involved in UPS. However, while UPS prisons were by no means free of abuse and neglect—reflecting the fundamental violence of the prison as an institution—they were not spaces of death and systematic physical torture.

Why was this the case? There are several possible reasons. First, some prison staff—particularly those who were part of the “Okwaare generation”—seemed to have clung to the rules and regulations in this period, drawing clear lines between what they saw as acceptable and unacceptable violence. There was only so much they could do, however, especially when the military took over certain prison sites. There are also limits to this explanation, as there are accounts of violence being carried out within UPS. Second, as explored in chapter 2, Amin used UPS to advertise his legitimacy, and he may have decided to try and maintain its credibility rather than turning it into a space for murder on a major scale. Third, the torturing and killing of detainees in government prisons that were overcrowded and housed convicted prisoners posed many logistical issues. It also did not provide the same degree of invisibility and impunity as the safe houses. Finally, Amin

likely wanted to maintain some of UPS's economic capacity. UPS was, as indicated earlier, experiencing a prison labor crisis in the 1970s, and Amin may have wanted to prevent further losses in the prison farms and industries. Although it is important to examine these strategic aspects, we must also consider how the regime's reliance on informal detention sites speaks to the limits of its power. Although incredibly violent and repressive, Amin's government was not able to control each and every public employee or institution. This serves as an important reminder of the resiliency and resistance that Ugandans exhibited during the 1970s. While there were limits to what the state could do, it did, however, have a major impact on UPS in this period, which is explored in the next section.

THE EFFECTS OF MILITARY RULE ON THE PRISONS SERVICE

Despite the Amin regime's use of safe houses as the main sites of torture and detention, UPS was—like many other state institutions—still profoundly impacted by military rule. When asked about the 1970s, most of the UPS officers interviewed were unequivocal in their assertion that it had been a decade of extreme difficulty. Etima referred to the Amin years as the “dark days,” likening the culture to “Animal Farm.”¹⁴⁷ Stephen (pseudonym) echoed this sentiment. “Up to the time Amin took over, things had not changed very much,” he commented. “The system was still very good. . . . The system was still working properly, until he took over.”¹⁴⁸

Amin's regime had an immediate impact on UPS. During his first year in power, he not only released thousands of prisoners, but he also created the “Prisons Council.”¹⁴⁹ It consisted of Amin, who served as the chairman, the minister of internal affairs, and the commissioner of prisons.¹⁵⁰ The council's purpose was to appoint, discipline, and dismiss officers, as well as boosting “morale” within UPS.¹⁵¹ It effectively undercut the power of the Public Service Commission, which had previously overseen these processes, in favor of Amin. In a speech to prison officers, Amin explained that the council had been created “in order to streamline good behavior, conduct and discipline” among the members of UPS and other security forces.¹⁵² One of the only assessments of the council's impact is offered by the Public Service Salaries Review Commission, which indicated that it never met and that Amin made decisions directly. “As a result,” the commission argued, “the service was virtually emasculated, through a catalogue of ill-conceived pronouncements.”¹⁵³ While there is very little against which to measure this assessment, the council likely impinged a great deal on UPS's operations, as Amin took decisions into his own hands.



FIGURE 5.3. Amin meets with senior prison and police officers at State House, 1973. Uganda Broadcasting Corporation.

The incursion of the military into UPS was most explicit through the introduction of military training for all prison recruits.¹⁵⁴ Prison officers remembered this firsthand. “Amin ordered that soldiers should come and help train,” Luke recalled. “So we were just looking on, and the instructors did come, and from the army they were there.” This, he argued, made him and his colleagues feel helpless. “Things were out of our control,” he remarked. “Many of us, the officers, we had no voices,” he continued. “And we could not discipline them [the new recruits] because you don’t know whom you are talking to, whom you are ordering.”¹⁵⁵ In his testimony to the CIVHR, George Ssentamu—who was the commissioner for much of the 1970s—indicated that new recruits had to go to Karamoja for “military training” in this period.¹⁵⁶ This blurring of prison and military training reflected the early years of UPS, when it had been under the remit of the colonial military.

As discussed, Amin also brought military personnel and paramilitary agents into UPS’s ranks. The CIVHR report concluded that the “militarisation” of UPS was “a mechanism for the horizontal spread of the machinery of terror in the interest of the regime.”¹⁵⁷ Many prison officers saw this as an affront to their professional integrity. Matthew (pseudonym) recounted how Amin would bring in new officers who were “not trained up to our levels,” many of whom he believed were acting as “spies” for the government.¹⁵⁸ He strongly criticized this encroachment, insinuating that UPS should not be

involved in military matters: “This is Uganda Prisons Service. We serve to teach the wrongdoers, to counsel them to become better citizens . . . but in this case . . . Amin even wanted prison officers to go to war.”¹⁵⁹ Patrick (pseudonym) echoed this, remarking, “Ours was a service, not the force.”¹⁶⁰ Prison staff thus turned to idealized professional identities to critique the Amin state, arguing that his approach to prison work violated their autonomy and ethos.

Many officers felt that the presence of military and paramilitary agents eroded UPS’s emphasis on collegiality and meritocracy. Some officers discussed how promotions became increasingly tied to ethnicity. Those who were not from West Nile “had it rough,” William (pseudonym) said, suggesting that those who “did not belong to his [Amin’s] region” would not be promoted, regardless of their performance.¹⁶¹ Reflecting this tension, Luke indicated that he was very wary around officers who were Muslim and/or came from Amin’s ethnic group. Other UPS staff emphasized a more general lack of trust. Joseph Etima said they were “living under fear,” knowing that their colleagues could be “the ones making the list . . . a list of people who should be picked and killed.”¹⁶²

When asked about the impact of the Amin years, many retired prison officers immediately commented on the deaths of their fellow staff. “There was no question of law,” Etima remarked, “and we lost our colleagues . . . many of them. Because of high-handedness, of those who are working for Amin.”¹⁶³ One space in which prison officers were targeted was the morning parade, which was a cornerstone of UPS’s daily rhythm. “During Amin’s time,” William commented, “I remember . . . you know every morning we must have a parade. If you could have maybe a member of staff [who] is against you, and he puts you to any army man, to your surprise, you will find yourself being taken [away] without knowing [why].” In many cases, SRB agents would be involved. They would “just come in civilians’ clothes, park outside the gate,” William recalled. “Maybe they’re cracking jokes with you [but then] you enter [the car] on gunpoint, putting the boot shut.”¹⁶⁴ Through such encounters, many prison officers ended up in safe houses. Again, it is difficult to quantify exactly how many were affected. Joseph Etima estimated that approximately fifty senior officers alone were killed during these years, with detention as a part of their punishment and a precursor to their murder.¹⁶⁵ George Ssentamu, the commissioner of prisoners at this time, reported that Mohammed Ruzigala—the SRB agent who reportedly ran Luzira—“spearheaded the killing of prisons staff.” Ssentamu offered further details of such incursions in his testimony to the CIVHR. He recalled a day when “many soldiers came to our office, armed, and called out the names

they wanted to take.” The prison officers who were taken “never appeared again,” having likely been killed in Nakasero.¹⁶⁶

Senior officers were often targeted by the regime. Ssentamu was the only commissioner of prisons who survived the Amin years. As mentioned in chapter 3, Okwaare was killed during the 1970s. His successor, Leonard Kigonya, was also killed. Amin had appointed Kigonya in April 1971, shortly after the coup. Initially, Amin had praised him for his “years of experience” and remarked that “the Prisons Department would be capably run” under his leadership.¹⁶⁷ Prior to his death, Kigonya was stripped of his post and detained following an ill-fated invasion attempt by Ugandan exiles living in Tanzania, in which he was alleged to be involved. Amin had ordered that Kigonya be arrested “so that other officers didn’t follow his example and bring a lot of confusion into the country.”¹⁶⁸ As a result, he was placed in Makindye, where he was held for a few months.¹⁶⁹ Following his release, he was forced to retire from UPS.

Kigonya’s family remembers the 1970s as a painful time. Characterizing him as a “good” man and father who “loved his work so much,” they spoke about the fear that permeated their lives during the 1970s.¹⁷⁰ One of his sisters recalled seeing a TV broadcast in which Amin was interrogating Kigonya about Benedicto Kiwanuka, whom he was alleged to be working closely with in anti-Amin activities. She remembers crying while watching, “fearing that maybe on that very day he [Amin] was going to kill him.”¹⁷¹ At one point, Amin allegedly threatened to kill Kigonya’s family on the air. When Kigonya disappeared, the family desperately sought information about his whereabouts. One of his sons recalled how the day of his disappearance had started out as a “normal day,” in which Kigonya went to work at his hardware store but did not return. The family began hearing rumors that he had been chased by SRB agents and taken away.¹⁷² In his testimony to the CIVHR about Kigonya’s death, Ssentamu indicated that Kigonya’s “car was found along the road full of blood and his body has never been recovered anywhere.”¹⁷³ This made it difficult for the family, like so many others in this period, to find closure. “You think, maybe he will come back . . . but eh, we had to persist. Yes, we had to persist. . . . Life has got to go on,” they said. “We missed him and we are still missing him.”¹⁷⁴

Due to such targeted killings, some officers temporarily left UPS. Isaac recalled how some of his colleagues “had to run away from prisons, to go into exile, go in hiding for some time, because we were not sure what would come next.”¹⁷⁵ By the time the Uganda-Tanzania War broke out, Etima had “run away” to his village, while Stephen had headed for home even earlier.¹⁷⁶ “They wanted to kill me,” Stephen explained, “so I had to leave the Prisons

Service for the time being. . . . I went home for three years.” He recalled how many officers had to follow a similar path: “To survive, they had to escape.”¹⁷⁷

UPS officers also had to deal with the “lodgers,” or those who had been brought from safe houses.¹⁷⁸ John Sekabira, a university student who was initially detained by the SRB, recounted this experience in his testimony to the CIVHR. Unsure of why he had been transferred, an SRB agent apparently told him, “You were lucky. The order was to finish you. Go and serve that, maybe you come back alive.”¹⁷⁹ In the ICJ report, a former detainee at Makindye Military Prison gave a similar account. Discussing his experience at Makindye, he reported, “The first night I was there . . . the soldiers went into ‘Singapore’ and bayoneted the prisoners. . . . Those who were not dead were taken to Luzira for treatment.”¹⁸⁰ Officers based at Luzira recalled numerous instances where detainees had been brought to the prison without warning or proper documentation. “It was very difficult for prison officers,” Luke explained, “because although professionally we would advise that they [the ‘lodgers’] should not be received by us, but because of the political environment . . . there was nothing we could do.”¹⁸¹ Joseph Etima indicated that UPS officers did their best to care for this group under the circumstances. When they arrived at Luzira, they were “almost skeletal [*sic*],” he remarked, due to the terrible conditions they had faced in detention, but the officers would “look after them and heal them.”¹⁸²

Along with receiving “lodgers,” Luzira served as a primary burial site for victims of extrajudicial killings. This was not unique to Luzira. Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, one of Kenya’s most infamous carceral sites, is home to many unmarked graves from the colonial period, potentially including that of Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army.¹⁸³ This practice of burying victims of state violence at prison sites, as discussed in chapter 4, had begun during the Obote I years: in his testimony to the CIVHR, Ssentamu reported that more than four hundred bodies had been brought to Luzira following the attack on Mengo Palace in 1966.¹⁸⁴ Many more arrived during Amin’s presidency. The ICJ reported that, following the purge of Acholi and Langi soldiers shortly after the coup, “most of the bodies were buried in mass graves in prisons.”¹⁸⁵ In an interview with the *Daily Monitor*, former superintendent of police Daniel Mulemezi claimed that Benedicto Kiwanuka’s body was buried at Luzira after having been dipped into an acid solution to avoid identification marks.¹⁸⁶ Luzira’s status as a graveyard is also reflected in Ugandan literature. In Grace Ibingira’s novel, *Bitter Harvest*, a government official orders the “preparation of mass graves” at the prison following a massacre of opposition supporters.¹⁸⁷ “The bodies had been fully buried in unmarked graves within the secluded

confines of the maximum security prison,” Ibingira writes. “The next of kin would never know for sure what had happened or where to find them.”¹⁸⁸ While likely a reference to the victims of the Battle of Mengo, Ibingira’s novel speaks to how Luzira’s mass graves continue to haunt public memories in Uganda.

While many officers saw the Amin years as a very negative time for UPS, others offered more positive appraisals. Generally, these were officers who worked outside of Kampala during this period, and thus they may have been less directly impacted by the violence. Additionally, some officers could have been more concerned with covering up the details of what happened in prisons, depending on their level of involvement or perception of the state at this time. Adopting a defensive tone when asked about this period, Benjamin (pseudonym) insisted that nothing “bad” happened at UPS during Amin’s presidency. “The government changed, but it wasn’t very bad. . . . The prison was not affected,” he said. “It’s the only institution I think, which remained intact. We didn’t see anything which was bad.”¹⁸⁹ Samuel (pseudonym) had a much more positive view of this period. He praised Amin for having “united all the security personnel” and teaching prison officers to become more “self-reliant.”¹⁹⁰ As a Ganda officer who had worked in the Buganda Kingdom Prisons Service, Samuel’s praise was more likely due to his anger towards Obote for abolishing the kingdoms and the attack on Mengo Palace rather than his admiration of Amin. This response underscores the ways in which politics and personal identity could impact officers’ views. Ultimately, these varied views reflect the vexed position of this period within Uganda’s history, as well as the range of experiences within UPS. In an institution that encompassed nearly forty prisons—employing officers from a range of ages, ethnic backgrounds, and ranks—experiences and perceptions of the 1970s were bound to differ.¹⁹¹

Although prison officers discussed the challenges they faced during the Amin years, many insisted that they coped by turning to the professional ideals and principles discussed in chapters 2 and 3. These, they indicated, guided their response to the Amin state. “After Amin things changed because of conditions, but we still continued doing our work,” Matthew commented. “We cannot change as I told you, we have standing orders.”¹⁹² This refrain of consistency and order was a key theme in officers’ recollections. Luke, who was highly critical of Amin, emphasized how he focused on “running a prison as it should be. Just as a prison should be run, that is all.”¹⁹³ He therefore sought to demonstrate his clear knowledge of and adherence to professional guidelines. Echoing this, Isaac insisted that “the style was still the same” in prisons despite the changes wrought by military rule,¹⁹⁴ while

Etima remarked, “We kept to our job.”¹⁹⁵ Martin (pseudonym), who worked mainly on prison farms, acknowledged the violence of the Amin years, but said that his day-to-day work “didn’t change much.” “I was already trained. I knew what to be done and what not to be done,” he commented.¹⁹⁶

Officers also emphasized their role as public servants, insisting that they remained politically neutral. As was the case in their discussions about rules and regulations, the separation from politics was presented as fundamental and automatic. Luke insisted that officers’ approach did not change in the 1970s, because “we as prison, we were the technical people, the policy within the prison was the same. There was no change.”¹⁹⁷ Patrick was also adamant that UPS remained neutral, commenting, “We don’t indulge ourselves in politics.”¹⁹⁸ While this clearly broke down in practice—as it does in most public service institutions—such statements illuminate how officers draw upon professional ideals and bureaucratic cultures in their remembrances of the Amin years, presenting these as anchors that guided them through times of chaos and uncertainty. Of course, such narratives also serve an important protective function, helping officers to distance themselves from the violence of this period. For some, this reflects their actual experience, whereas for others it is a strategic method of self-preservation.

To an extent, these narratives about prison officers’ professionalism emanated from other interviewees outside of UPS. Other government officials had high praise for UPS staff. Jacob (pseudonym), a retired magistrate, characterized the officers whom he encountered as “really real professionals” and “very kind.”¹⁹⁹ Echoing this, Henry Kyemba, the former minister, remarked, “I think they enjoyed the respect of their profession, and I don’t know, quite a number of prisoners . . . were praying that they be taken to the prison cells, so that they’re managed in the way they are supposed to be managed.”²⁰⁰ These accounts of course came from other public servants, who may have wanted to look out for their colleagues and stand in solidarity with them. While their statements—along with those of former detainees and reports such as the CIVHR—should not lead us to fully absolve UPS officers of responsibility for the violence of this period, they also suggest that there was a spectrum of responses to and level of involvement in the state’s repression.

PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

The case of the Uganda Prisons Service opens many key questions about the role of public servants in enabling, enacting, and resisting state-sponsored violence. This final section briefly explores some of the wider experiences of state employees during the Amin years, analyzing how they responded

to the government's abuses in this period. Scholars studying authoritarian regimes have often focused on the complicity of public servants and other professionals in state abuses. Much has been written about the "desk bureaucrats" and rank-and-file security agents who aided or carried out systematic massacres during the Nazi period.²⁰¹ Studies of military dictatorships in Latin America have drawn similar conclusions. Examining Brazilian police officers who tortured political opponents between 1964 and 1986, Martha K. Huggins argues, "The secularized, tautological morality of professionalism provides a legitimate justification for police violence."²⁰² Similarly, Lisa Hilbink contends that many judges "cooperated fully" with Pinochet's government in Chile, going beyond "passive capitulation to outright collaboration."²⁰³ More recently, attention has been drawn to the role of medical personnel in creating interrogation techniques used at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay.²⁰⁴ Reflecting on these issues, psychologist Stanley Milgram—who oversaw the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment—writes, "Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs . . . can become agents in a terrible destructive process."²⁰⁵ These studies represent troubling inquiries into the human condition, asking us to consider how we would act in similar circumstances. As historian Christopher Browning reflects in his disturbing account of a Nazi police battalion—one composed of "ordinary men" such as truck drivers and teachers—"If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?"²⁰⁶

Certainly, professional cultures have been harnessed in horrific ways to support authoritarian governments, and this can be seen in postcolonial Uganda. "Being a civil servant during the Amin regime was traumatic," wrote P. M. O. Onen, an engineer for the Kampala City Council. "We had to work either in violation of existing rules or according to none."²⁰⁷ The Uganda Public Service Salaries Commission echoed Onen's assessment. Reporting in the early 1980s, it asserted that state institutions had been "thoroughly interfered with" during Amin's presidency, and the public service had been "shabbily decimated over the last ten years or so with incalculable consequences."²⁰⁸ Reflecting on this period years later, Ugandan historian Phares Mutibwa offered a far more pointed criticism: "Professional ethics, whether in teaching, law or medicine, utterly collapsed."²⁰⁹

As Onen's memoir and the other accounts suggest, many public servants found their professional integrity under attack in the Amin years. Several individuals who had worked in government positions reflected upon these challenges during our interviews. Discussing the military, Jacob, the former magistrate, remarked, "They took over everything. They were the chiefs, they were the police, in fact they were even the courts."²¹⁰ As was

the case in UPS, military and paramilitary personnel impacted many long-standing institutions in this period, undermining the authority of the public servants who worked there. Again, this appears to have been particularly pronounced with the Uganda police. Soldiers “were the government,” recalled Michael, the former police officer. “Whatever they could ask from us we surrender.” Ultimately, he felt that the police “were controlled by the soldiers,” and that they were “fearing them all the time.”²¹¹ In his view, therefore, the military had become synonymous with the government, and resisting their authority was futile. Joshua (pseudonym), another police officer who had worked in the 1970s, offered a different take on this period. “Amin was not a very bad ruler,” he remarked, adding that sometimes his “junior people would misbehave.” While he acknowledged that military rule led to “some interruptions,” he said that these were “minor” and that police were able to “continue with [their] work” overall.²¹² The contrast in these accounts could be due to several factors, such as the officers’ rank at the time, where they were posted—both of which would affect their exposure to violence—and their own personal views of Amin.

Henry Kyemba, Amin’s former minister of health, experienced significant internal conflict about how to respond to the growing atrocities of his government. “It was the most difficult thing,” he reflected. “I was in sensitive positions. . . . You know that your president is telling a lie. What do you do? You immediately say, I run away. . . . What I grew up knowing, and what I got from the British training, was that as a civil servant, you had all the right to advise what was proper. . . . But you must also be aware that the head of government . . . because of the enormous power they wield, can do what he wants, if necessary go to parliament and amend the law.”²¹³ This account romanticizes the colonial period, echoing some of the comments by prison officers and sidestepping the realities of state violence under the British. It also speaks to how Kyemba struggled when his own conceptions of what it meant to be a civil servant were undermined during military rule. By 1977, he had reached a breaking point. Having lost his brother at the hands of the Public Safety Unit, he felt like a “sitting duck” and decided that he could be more “valuable” by “conveying the message of what was happening here” from outside of Uganda. Subsequently, he fled to Britain and wrote his scathing account of the Amin period, entitled *State of Blood: The Inside Story of Idi Amin*.²¹⁴

Many other professionals faced similar challenges. Yash Tandon—a scholar of international relations and the former director of the Makerere Institute of Social Research—was also forced to leave Uganda after becoming a target of the regime. Discussing the period, he remarked, “Right from

the start . . . Amin began to brutalize people.” Many of his colleagues at Makerere were also affected, such as Frank Kalimuzo, the vice-chancellor of Makerere, who was “tortured and killed” by Amin’s agents.²¹⁵

At times, public servants found ways to mitigate Amin’s abuses. Jacob recalled how security agents would arrive in the courts with someone they had recently arrested and demand their incarceration without offering evidence of any crime. In most cases, the magistrate would initially comply. “If we don’t convict him and put him to jail,” Jacob explained, “it is you who will be taken there.” However, Jacob claimed that he and his colleagues sought to undo this unjust imprisonment in a discreet manner: “What we did, we’d just make the warrant, send him to jail, then make a note . . . that I’ve been ordered, I was under duress by the complainant, so I ask the High Court to revise this case.” Often, he said, this led to prisoners’ releases.²¹⁶ While Jacob’s account could be seen as self-serving, there is no doubt that there were members of the public service who sought to resist or minimize the regime’s abuses. The experiences of these individuals remind us of the unprecedented challenges that many state professionals faced in the 1970s. They were constantly weighing their loyalty to the government, their own vulnerability, and their sense of duty in a context where the stakes were extremely high.



During Amin’s presidency, state punishment took on terrifying new dimensions. Whereas the Obote I regime had greatly expanded the state’s use of detention without trial in government prisons, Amin created an extensive detention apparatus in which detainees would be tortured and killed. Some survived, later courageously sharing stories that are filled with both brutality and moving examples of resistance and friendship. The military and the paramilitary organizations such as the State Research Bureau carried out most of the state’s violence, often interfering with the work done by long-standing security institutions such as UPS, the judiciary, and the Uganda Police. During this period, UPS prisons were sites of violence and terrible conditions, becoming places where detainees were “dumped” following their release from safe houses, as well as a graveyard for those murdered by the state.²¹⁷ These prisons were not, however, used systematically as places of torture or extrajudicial killings. This reflects the complex realities of confinement in the Amin years, as the government strategically utilized different spaces in the pursuit of different aims. UPS prisons could be used in an attempt to shore up the government’s facade of legitimacy and legality, while safe houses functioned as spaces in which to torture and kill perceived

dissidents. Ultimately, while representations of postcolonial violence in Uganda have focused on Amin's use of detention, safe houses were part of a wider system of state-sponsored violence that emerged before Amin and would continue after his downfall.

6 ~ State of War

Conflict and Confinement after Amin

ON APRIL 11, 1979, the Tanzanian People's Defence Force (TPDF) marched into the streets of Kampala, bringing an end to months of war and securing the downfall of Idi Amin's military dictatorship. For many Ugandans, this was a moment of celebration and hope, as it seemed to mark the close of a period of unprecedented state-led torture, detention, and extrajudicial killings. This was not to be the case. The capture of Kampala marked only a brief cessation of warfare. Between the outbreak of hostilities with Tanzania in November 1978 and the inauguration of Museveni in January 1986, Uganda was either in the midst of war or grappling with its immediate aftermath. The months following Amin's overthrow were particularly tumultuous, with Yusuf Lule (April 13–June 20, 1979), Godfrey Binaisa (June 20, 1979–May 12, 1980), and a military commission led by Paulo Muwanga (May 12–December 17, 1980) controlling the presidency.¹

By the close of 1980, Obote had returned to power following a disputed election. Although he would remain in office until July 1985, Obote's hold on the presidency was tenuous. Multiple insurgent groups sought to remove him from power, including the National Resistance Army (NRA), the Uganda Freedom Movement—led by former Uganda Prisons Service (UPS) officer Andrew Kayiira—and the Uganda National Rescue Front. The NRA and its guerrilla forces posed the greatest challenge, launching the Luweero

War, which is also referred to as the “Bush War,” in 1981.² This conflict, which took place in the “Luweero Triangle”—an area of seven hundred square kilometers just north of Kampala—resulted in large-scale killings and the detention and displacement of civilians.³ Facing heavy casualties at the hands of the NRA, the government forces rallied behind General Tito Okello Lutwa to topple Obote in July 1985. The NRA continued to fight on, however, overthrowing Okello Lutwa in January 1986 and paving the way for Museveni’s assumption of the presidency. In fewer than seven years, therefore, Uganda had six different leaders amidst nearly constant conflict.

Historians are beginning to grapple with the events and legacies of this period, but there is still much work to be done. There is a growing recognition among scholars that the scale of violence during the Obote II years may have surpassed the 1970s. As Richard Reid argues, “Uganda reached its nadir in the early 1980s. . . . The consensus is that his reign from the end of 1980 until the middle of 1985 was more brutal, and resulting in higher numbers of deaths, than the whole of Amin’s.”⁴ Such statements often hang uneasily at the end of assessments of the Amin years, serving as an ambiguous addendum at best. Part of this can be explained by the disproportionate fascination with Amin, who has proved to be a much more compelling focal point for scholarship than his transient group of successors. There is also the issue of proximity and political sensitivity: studying the 1980s with a critical lens remains somewhat challenging while Museveni is in power.

Finally, sources have proved elusive. Warfare took its toll on government records during this period, particularly in Kampala, which was attacked several times. In the case of UPS, there are no annual reports available for the first half of the 1980s, and the Training School library was raided during the war with Tanzania. The High Court Archives, however, which were restored in 2018, contain hundreds of cases involving unlawful imprisonment in the 1980s, and many district records have information on this period. Further insights come from newspapers such as *Munnansi*, the main paper of the Democratic Party, which offered a critical counterpoint to the official media. Journalists regularly reported extrajudicial killings, the conditions of wartime detention camps and safe houses, and the constant stream of political detainees going into Luzira during the Obote II years—often at the cost of their own detention. The study of the 1980s also holds more possibilities for oral history work, as many Ugandans who lived through the wars are alive today. There is also the gray literature, namely the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights (CIVHR) report and material from Amnesty International. While not as extensive as the evidence available on the Amin years, these sources do provide some information on state violence in this period.

This chapter examines the impact of these wars on government prisons and the state's extensive use of detention without trial. Unsurprisingly, the conflicts of this period had a major effect on state institutions, including UPS. During the Uganda-Tanzania War, UPS suffered a personnel crisis, as some officers were "called up" to the front lines while others fled the violence.⁵ The Prisons Service also had many material challenges, as supplies were appropriated by soldiers and many prison farms were significantly damaged. A similar situation occurred during the Luweero War, resulting in years of scarcity within prison facilities. Uganda's incarcerated population was also significantly impacted by the wartime context. After defeating Amin's army, Tanzanian troops freed prisoners en masse. Subsequently, these prison sites were filled with Amin's supporters, including thousands of his ex-soldiers and members of paramilitary groups. Many remained throughout the 1980s and were joined by the influx of detainees held by the Obote II state. Prisons were characterized by particularly extreme overcrowding and inhumane conditions in this period, exacerbating the difficulties experienced by those held inside.

During his second presidency, Obote used the context of warfare to justify widespread state-sanctioned violence. His tactics echoed those from his first presidency, such as reintroducing the Public Order and Security Act, while also using the Amin regime's strategy of informal detention. The Obote II government used detention without trial on a massive scale, putting thousands of Ugandans into government prisons and untold numbers into safe houses. The latter remained spaces of torture and extrajudicial killings. Obote also set up wartime detention camps in the Luweero Triangle, drawing on a method long employed by governments in times of warfare or insurgency.⁶ These too were spaces of significant violence and neglect. The state's carceral network thus expanded in this period, becoming a penal palimpsest of previous practices. While it is difficult to say definitively based on the evidence available, the scale of detention in this period may have indeed surpassed that of the Amin years. Regardless, the state's use of detention without trial was extensive and brutal.

THE IMPACT OF WAR ON THE PRISON SYSTEM

The war between Tanzania and Uganda broke out in November 1978. It was the product of a long-standing animosity between Idi Amin and Julius Nyerere, the president of Tanzania. Obote had fled to Tanzania following Amin's successful coup and was welcomed by Nyerere, who refused to recognize Amin's government. Subsequently, Tanzania became a base for anti-Amin activities, including the failed invasion attempt in 1972. Relations between

the two nations reached a breaking point when, in October 1978, Amin's army annexed Kagera Salient, a borderland in northwestern Tanzania that Amin claimed belonged to Uganda. Over forty thousand residents fled the area as Amin's troops destroyed property and attacked civilians.⁷ Outraged by Amin's actions, Nyerere launched a counteroffensive, using a combination of Tanzanian troops and Ugandans in exile to invade Uganda. The Ugandan contingent, known as the Uganda National Liberation Front, was composed of a variety of groups. Within five months, Kampala had fallen and Amin had been ousted from power.

The Uganda-Tanzania War had a significant impact on Uganda's prison system, temporarily changing the landscape of incarceration and establishing a pattern that would persist throughout the first half of the 1980s. Over the course of the war, many UPS officers were redeployed to the front lines or ran away due to safety concerns, prisoners were released en masse, prison facilities were damaged or destroyed, and, following the war's end, those considered to be loyal to Amin were detained without trial. This section examines the war and the period between Amin's overthrow and Obote's return to the presidency.

As the prospects of victory became increasingly slim in the early months of 1979, Amin began calling up additional troops from the police and prison services, further blurring the professional boundaries between these institutions. On March 3—just over a month before Kampala fell to the TPDF—Amin gave a speech to a group of police and prison officers who had reportedly “responded willingly to join the battle with determination and high morale.”⁸ In his speech, Amin thanked them for “their devotion to fight the enemy to the last man in defence of the motherland” and also assured them that the TPDF was struggling.⁹ While this is the only mention of officers' recruitment that appears in archival material, retired prison officers recalled losing staff to the war effort. “By that time,” Luke (pseudonym) explained, “things were of course out of hand. Things were already out of hand, so Amin was sort of desperate. . . . Most of Amin's soldiers were running away and he was just looking for reinforcement[s], and eh, most of the young prison officers who were recruited during that time were even trained by military officers.” Luke said it was very difficult for him and his colleagues to watch their staff go to war, but he also felt powerless to stop it. “There was nothing you could do,” he commented, “Those staff who were ordered to go, they had to go.”¹⁰ UPS lost further personnel as officers fled for safety, particularly as the Tanzanians neared Kampala.¹¹

Prison facilities were also affected by the war. Much of the impact was on prison farms, especially in rural areas. Reportedly, the TPDF used farms

for storage, supplies, and administration. As a result, these prison farms ceased all normal operations, and by the end of the war they were no longer in the “same shape.”¹² UPS facilities in Kampala were also damaged. “That looting was fantastic,” Luke recalled, noting how the tailoring workshop at Luzira had been completely stripped bare. He was particularly frustrated with the looting of the library, which to him represented “my contact, and my colleagues’ contact in the world, where we would go.” “A lot of those books were looted. . . . If I went in [now] I would shed tears because so many of those books I participated in buying and stocking, they’re not there,” he lamented.¹³ Luke’s words reflect the sense of disillusionment among the officers of the Okwaare generation, who barely recognized the institution that they had once so proudly signed up to work for.

Such damages are still remembered among officers serving in UPS today. Moses, a current officer, characterized this period as one of immense loss. In his view, the war impacted UPS more “than any other government service.”¹⁴ Describing the damage, he said: “They [the TPDF] took our trucks, they opened the prisons, they were feasting on our food that we had grown, they were feasting on our cows and sheep and goats. Now by the end of the war, prisons started from almost nothing.”¹⁵

Notwithstanding his statement, however, it is clear from the evidence available that many other state institutions were similarly affected. The Public Service Building, for example, was “burnt down,” and there was “widespread destruction of government property.”¹⁶

Along with the damage to the prison facilities, many officers came back to find empty cells. For UPS, one of the most tangible impacts of the war was the mass release of prisoners. Originally targeting UPS sites for their ammunitions and other supplies, the TPDF also opened up prisons across the country, allowing both detainees and prisoners to walk free. Although governments had done voluntary releases of such large groups of prisoners in the past, this action was unprecedented. Reporting just days after the takeover of Kampala, a journalist for the *Uganda Times*—the new official newspaper—wrote, “The Commissioner of Prisons, Mr. George Ssentamu revealed that there is not a single prisoner in the Uganda Prisons at the moment.”¹⁷ While likely an exaggeration, this comment speaks to the scale of releases during this time.

Several officers recalled this experience in interviews. “Many of the prisoners were released,” Luke explained, “including those who were genuinely criminals . . . including those who were condemned to death. They were all released.” In his view, this was a grave disservice to the public. “Dangerous prisoners were released back to the society before they had completed their

sentences,” he remarked. “That was a kind of . . . social interruption.”¹⁸ Luke’s comment speaks to the firm line that prison staff often drew between “criminal” prisoners, whom they generally saw as justly incarcerated, and those who had been detained, whom they were more likely to see as victims of injustice. Internal UPS correspondence provides a similar narrative. Writing to the district commissioners in western Uganda immediately following the war, the regional prison commissioner described the situation as follows: “At the height of excitement during the liberation war, prisons were opened and prisoners were set free. It is reported that some of them are already committing fresh crimes. It will be appreciated that among the prisoners were hard core and dangerous criminals.”¹⁹ He urged his staff to try and remedy the situation by finding those released and bringing them back to prison.²⁰

In interviews, the officers offered a range of explanations for why such a mass release had occurred. William (pseudonym) insisted the TPDF was looking for guns, while Isaac (pseudonym) suggested that the freeing of prisoners was also motivated by the Tanzanians’ desire for more personnel: “I think they said let’s open up them for the prisoners, and then they’ll be free, and possibly they may join and support us.”²¹ John Pancras Orau, a former member of the Uganda Army who was detained after the war, suggested that the Tanzanians “thought they [the prisoners] were Amin’s hostages,” and released them as part of their wider struggle against the military government.²²

Safe houses were also emptied after the war. Images of their cells were shared in numerous media outlets, such as the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation, *Drum* magazine, and newspapers in the Global North. Amin’s security agencies had killed many of the detainees prior to the seizure of Kampala and had left others to die in their cells. The *New York Times* described in graphic terms the scene that awaited the TPDF and their Ugandan allies in Nakasero and Makindye: “At Makindye military-police barracks, the Tanzanians found concrete prison walls splatted with blood. Stashed on one side were crude instruments of death, including car axles, sledgehammers and machetes. At the pink stucco headquarters of the State Research Bureau, the dreaded secret police, they found underground cells packed with corpses of prisoners, slain in a final bloodletting by the fleeing captors.”²³ In the *Abyssinian Chronicles*, one of the most famous literary depictions of the Amin years, Moses Isegawa writes about the first glimpse of the safe house survivors on the streets of Kampala, describing them as a “group of emaciated, ragged, ecstatic, skeletal men and women, freshly vomited from the torture chambers on Nakasero Hill.” In this fictional portrayal, the detainees were deeply marked by their traumatic experiences: “They walked

as though they were still shackled and intoxicated by the stink of incarceration, and the vomit, the blood, the excreta and the violence of torture chambers and detention centers. They walked with the full weight of freedom on their shoulders, and for some it seemed too much to bear.”²⁴ Isegawa’s words speak to the challenges faced by those who survived the many horrors of detention.

It would not take long, however, for the prisons and safe houses to be filled again. As the TPDF and the new Ugandan government sought to re-establish control, Amin’s ex-soldiers and paramilitary agents were put into UPS prisons. This included a number of high-ranking prison officers, as well as some police officers and government officials. While the exact number of UPS staff detained is not clear, a list of twenty-six prison officers’ names was published in the *Uganda Times* following their release from prison in August 1979.²⁵ Amin’s ex-soldiers, however, made up most of the detained population. Following the end of the war, Lule’s government had put out a call for all members of the military to report to Makindye Military Barracks, ostensibly so that they could be redeployed in Uganda’s new army.²⁶ Instead, they were imprisoned en masse. Former soldier John Pancras Orau, who wrote a memoir about his time in Luzira during this period, estimates that over six thousand soldiers were detained—a number that is not unreasonable when compared against the prison records.²⁷ The ex-soldiers were held primarily in the Luzira complex, as well as Kirinya and Mbale Prison.²⁸ They were not formally charged with any crime; rather they were held due to their perceived involvement in the violence of the Amin regime. They were generally held separately from other prisoners, detained alongside others associated with Amin’s government. Describing the mixture of detainees within Upper Prison, Orau wrote about the “soldiers and paramilitary members, businessmen, former ministers, ambassadors, provincial governors, district commissioners, permanent secretaries, and other magnificoes, right down to fourteen-year-old minors.”²⁹

The mass detention of Amin’s former soldiers represented a new way of apportioning blame for state violence, as an entire institution was held accountable. Isegawa again reflects on this issue in the *Abyssinian Chronicles*, commenting on public perceptions of the military. As one character describes: “I looked closely at the soldiers. . . . They looked haggard, harassed, as if they had been fed on poisoned food for a month. I knew that among them were men who had committed the most horrendous crimes, torturing, mutilating and killing people. How was the chaff going to be separated from the grain?”³⁰ Under Amin’s successors, there was no such separation. With the exception of those soldiers who fled Uganda and went to nearby

countries, the majority of those who had served in the Uganda army under Amin were incarcerated.³¹ Their situation reflects the shifting contours of deviancy in postcolonial Uganda, whereby those carrying out state repression could quickly become its targets as political power changed hands.

Many of these detainees, however, contested their condemnation, insisting that their professional status and duty to serve the nation should be respected. This has continued into the contemporary period, with former soldiers publicly defending themselves and criticizing the state for how they were treated at this time. Orau's memoir is one example of this. Other ex-soldiers have turned to the media. In May 2016, for example, an article appeared in the *Daily Monitor* with the headline, "I was condemned for being 'Amin's' soldier"—an appellation that has been widely used, indicating how closely these soldiers were associated with Amin rather than the institution of the military as a whole. The article featured an interview with Lt. Col Abudlatif Tiya, a high-ranking officer during the Uganda-Tanzania War. He characterized his incarceration in Luzira as the "worst moment of his life," not only because of the poor conditions but also because he was "not taken to court" and was "not accused of any crime apart from being 'Amin's soldier.'"³² As had been the case in previous regimes, Tiya contested his detention, arguing that it transgressed expectations of due process, not to mention the law. These ex-soldiers have also launched collective efforts. In the early 2000s, more than forty-five thousand soldiers—many of whom had served in the Amin years—brought a case to Uganda's courts, arguing that they had been wrongfully terminated and should be provided gratuities and salary arrears. The case reached the Supreme Court in 2009. Although the ex-soldiers ultimately lost, judiciary officials expressed some sympathy for them, as did certain sections of the public. In one appeal, Justice J. W. N. Tsekooko wrote: "Revolutionary changes of government particularly by military force in Uganda have invariably always left unpleasant scars, consequences, and experiences. . . . Some of the innocent soldiers unfortunately had their services terminated involuntarily and as a consequence their service rights and benefits, including retirement benefits such as pensions, were adversely affected by revolutionary events about which they could hardly have a say."³³ Here, the former soldiers were portrayed as victims of circumstances rather than as active agents of repression. This reflects both the wider ambiguities surrounding views of these soldiers today in Uganda as well as the range of roles and experiences that these soldiers had within the military.

While the debate about "Amin's soldiers" continues to this day, prison officers remember this time as one of acute challenges. Luke, who was based in Luzira during this period, recognized the unique status of the ex-soldiers,

whom he characterized as “not really prisoners” but rather “prisoners of war.” Not surprisingly, this created security concerns. “There were too many, you could not control them, many were escaping,” Luke commented. “I was not doing my job as [a] prison officer anymore, as far as they were concerned because I could not—I could not handle them. . . . So now we the prison officer. . . . who are used to running prisons according to the prison regulations, we could not—we could not run these prisoners of war following the prison regulations.” It is worth revisiting Luke’s earlier statement on the Amin years mentioned in chapter 5, in which he insisted that he was focused on “running a prison as it should be.” In contrast, he characterizes the 1980s as a time when such a goal was unattainable, reflecting the extremely difficult conditions in prisons at the time. Under these circumstances, Luke turned to his superiors in the government. “I recall I had a meeting with the late Oyite-Ojok . . . who was then the army chief of staff,” he explained, “and I told him, ‘Look, here are these ex-Amin’s soldiers, they are there in jail, they are literally not our prisoners, but they are prisoners of war. If you want them to be continued in the prison, I need soldiers.’”³⁴ While Luke expressed his qualms about the ex-soldiers’ presence in Luzira, he focused on the personnel shortage rather than challenging the fact of their detention. This approach was perhaps in order to protect himself rather than becoming a target of the state or was based on an assessment of what the government would realistically agree to. Either way, as in the Amin years, UPS and the military were again becoming entangled.

George Ssentamu, who remained in his position as the commissioner of prisons following Amin’s downfall, spoke publicly about the strain of holding so many detainees within UPS. In April 1980, the *Uganda Times* reported on Ssentamu’s plea for a “an independent” body to be formed in order to “study and recommend ways in which Luzira prisons could be rehabilitated.” Ssentamu stated that the “living conditions at the prison had greatly deteriorated and life was becoming unbearable for the prisoners there.” The main issues, he continued, were the “congestion of prisoners, lack of essentials, constant blockage of water and sewerage [*sic*] systems,” as well as the lack of new cooking equipment, which meant that the “food prepared . . . was unfit for human consumption.”³⁵ Such a direct plea for help from the commissioner of prisons in the official newspaper indicates how dire the conditions within Luzira had become. As Luke explained, this was partially a consequence of the earlier mass release of prisoners, which caused an additional labor crisis in prison farms, further depleting UPS’s food supply.³⁶

The detained soldiers frequently contested their status, registering their protests against the state in multiple ways. At times, they did this by

refusing to follow prison rules. In the minutes of the Jinja District Security Meeting held in July of that year, it was noted that the imprisoned population of ex-soldiers at Kirinya was becoming unmanageable, especially as some were protesting their incarceration.³⁷ “It was observed that sixteen hundred personnel . . . in Amin’s Army were interned at Kirinya Prison,” the meeting minutes indicate, “and there were rumours that those among them who had surrendered and not fought to the end for Amin were threatening to go on strike as they felt it was unfair for them to stay in prison indefinitely. They felt that they should be released or told of a specific period of detention.”³⁸ John Orau provides a similar narrative in relation to Luzira, suggesting that the former soldiers “refused” to follow “all the rules in [the] book of the prison regime,” as they knew that they had not been convicted of any crime.³⁹ The detainees thus sought to hold the state accountable, asking that their detention be brought into line with Uganda’s laws and echoing long-standing critiques by opponents of earlier regimes. There is certainly some hypocrisy here, as many members of the military had set aside these expectations of due process and respect for rights when it came to Amin’s detainees. To resolve the issue in Jinja, members of the District Security team concluded that “the Commanding officer UNLA Jinja should send a platoon of soldiers to assist the prison warders,” as a number of these prisoners had tried to escape.⁴⁰ Bringing in the military was once again deemed to be the most feasible solution. Within a few weeks, the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) soldiers had “dug in for duty” at Kirinya, but this also brought new challenges.⁴¹ By September, many prison officers had reportedly “abandoned their duties of guarding” as a result of the soldiers’ presence—likely because many were intimidated or threatened—further placing the prison under the military’s control.⁴²

The detained soldiers’ families also pushed back against the state’s use of detention, turning to the courts. For example, one soldier’s mother applied for a writ of habeas corpus for her son, whom she claimed was arrested at Makindye upon initially reporting there after Amin’s downfall. He was taken to Luzira Prison, she continued, where he was “not allowed to receive visitors” and “has to date not been taken to any court of law to answer to any charge, nor has he been taken before any tribunal for this or any purpose.” The mother insisted that her son was “in grave danger.”⁴³ Another case involved a former member of the Special Branch, an example of how police officers and other government officials were also being detained at this time.⁴⁴ This detective corporal, who was stationed at the Police Headquarters in Kampala, was arrested in Tororo by a police officer in July 1979 while visiting a friend.⁴⁵ Following his arrest, he was taken to Tororo Police

Station and then to Tororo Prison, where he was held for nearly a month. In August, the detective corporal was transferred to Luzira Prison, where he remained in detention without charge. At this point, his great-uncle launched a case on his behalf regarding unlawful detention.

The policies and operational developments within UPS are very difficult to trace in this period. This is not only due to the lack of official documentation available but also a result of the constant changes within the political arena. As Robert Kakooza Mutale—the editor of the *Economy* newspaper—stated in his testimony to the CIVHR, the period after Amin’s overthrow ushered in an “unexpected state of anarchy,” making it “difficult to determine where the real locus of power lay at any one given moment.”⁴⁶ Prison officers had similar accounts. Reflecting on the final stages of the war and its aftermath, Samuel (pseudonym) remarked, “The government was not functioning, it was as if it was not there,” while Luke discussed “instability” that arose as the “the politicians were jostling for power.”⁴⁷ Echoing officers’ discussions of the Amin years, Luke positioned himself and his colleagues as a counterweight to chaos: “For us who were professional prison officers, we did not have much to do with them. . . . We would advise, but many were not taking our advice seriously. . . . They were more interested in what—I think maybe their own survival within the new government, you see?” As a result, he said that officers just had to “make do with whatever was available,” reflecting the many constraints within public service at this time.⁴⁸ As was the case during the Amin years, Luke and other prison officers sought to portray themselves as offering a degree of stability and professional integrity amidst political upheaval.

From the limited material available, it seems that the Binaisa government—the longest-serving administration in this period and thus the most likely to have a coherent agenda—based its policies around the goal of “rebuilding,” a trend that would persist for years to come. This was not only framed in positive, forward-thinking terms, but it was also done in a way that reminded government institutions of their entanglement with Amin. For example, in July 1979, Minister of Internal Affairs Paulo Muwanga gave a speech to prison and police officers, warning them of the dangers of “Aminism” and outlining “practical steps” for the restoration of the two forces, including the reinstatement of overseas training, which had largely lapsed after the 1960s.⁴⁹ In a clear attempt to distance himself from Amin and Obote, Binaisa also announced that his government would repeal the Public Order and Security Act, replacing it with a “more relaxed form of legislation.”⁵⁰ Based on the available material, it seems that the act was temporarily revoked, only to reemerge when Obote returned to power.

As had been the case in the previous regimes, Amin's successors turned to large-scale clemency measures as they tried to distance themselves from military rule.⁵¹ In 1979 alone, there were at least four mass releases of prisoners. In total, over seventeen hundred individuals were reportedly freed. Many were Amin's former soldiers, although some convicted prisoners were also included. Binaisa's government strategically framed the releases as gestures meant to foster reconciliation and promote rebuilding. In December 1979, for example, Minister Paulo Muwanga urged the group of one thousand recently freed prisoners and detainees to "go back to your village and join hands with the government in the enormous task of reconstruction and rehabilitation." Echoing Amin's earlier rhetoric, he called upon them to be "good citizens" with "clean intentions" and reminded them that their freedom was contingent on good behavior: "Remember why we have freed you. . . . If you go back and get stubborn, you will be dealt with accordingly."⁵² At this stage, following decades of authoritarian governance and the widespread use of detention without trial, it was clear that this was no empty threat.

Obote's return to the presidency following a disputed election in December 1980 did not quell the violence that had ensued since Amin's overthrow; it intensified it. As A. B. K. Kasozi has argued, the repression under Obote II was constant: "Violence had been a permanent feature of the Amin regime. Each day, someone in Uganda was at the receiving end of political or other forms of violence. However, violence under Amin was like a tide, peaking and subsiding at certain periods. . . . But in the second Obote period, violence was always at high tide."⁵³ In part, this was due to continuous and multifaceted conflicts, including the Luweero War and other struggles with insurgent groups.

This has a major impact on UPS and other state institutions. For prisons, one of the main effects was the loss of farm equipment and facilities. Luke insisted that the NRA fighters, like the Tanzanians before them, took supplies from UPS sites and, in some cases, entire prison farms. "Every prison farm where they would go in, they would loot, loot the farms," he remarked. Prison farms in the western region were the most severely affected, Luke claimed, with sites such as Isimba, Bihanga, and Kibarua being taken over completely. When Luke went to Isimba Prison Farm after the war, he said it was "devastated." "I found the prison was thoroughly looted," he continued, "all the livestock were eaten up . . . the armoury store was broken up . . . and even the staff houses were destroyed." Trying to begin the task of rebuilding, he said, "was the most difficult because, you know starting something from scratch, especially when a unit was working very well and

then starting from scratch,” he lamented, repeating the phrase at several times during the interview.⁵⁴ In a similarly somber tone, Moses claimed that the Luweero War “finished everything” within UPS. “It was worse than the ’79 war, because the ’79 war, it last[ed] for like six months, but this one lasted for five years, it was protracted!” he exclaimed.⁵⁵

During the war, prison farms were also used for detention purposes. Luke discussed this in his interview, and further evidence can be found in archival materials. The High Court Archives, for example, include a case involving a former administrative secretary for the Hoima District Administration who was arrested in November 1985 by NRA Soldiers and taken to Mubuku Prison Farm in Fort Portal, where he remained in detention until after the NRA’s victory.⁵⁶ Ugandans could thus be detained not only by the state during this period but also by those seeking its downfall. This practice continued after Obote was overthrown. Witness Nathan Karema testified to the CIVHR that, following his arrest in August of 1985, he was taken to “various NRA Camps and Detention Centres with many other prisoners” and was “subjected to various forms of inhuman and degrading treatment, torture and harassments.”⁵⁷

As had been the case in 1978–79, prison staff also faced personal risks in this wartime environment. Isaac, whose chaplaincy work required him to move around the country, took many precautions during this time. “I reduced my travels,” he said, “because many of us were suspected as being Amin’s people in the previous governments,” and he thus faced the risk of re-appraisals.⁵⁸ Joseph, a prison officer who was working in Luzira in the 1980s, was killed by a UNLA soldier. According to his case file, he was “unlawfully and maliciously shot dead without any reasonable and probable cause” on the Luzira grounds by a private in the UNLA, perhaps because he was perceived as being part of Amin’s regime.⁵⁹ Joseph was in his twenties at the time of his murder. He left behind his parents and a young child.

The war affected UPS in other ways. For Canon Dr. Johnson Byabashaija, the current commissioner general of prisons, the outbreak of this conflict motivated him to join UPS. Trained as a veterinarian at Makerere University, he indicated that the toll of the war had made his work redundant. “The whole cattle corridor was in flames,” he commented, “so I would have nowhere to work.”⁶⁰ Facing this new reality, he started examining other options, choosing UPS because he could use his veterinary expertise on the prison farms. While Byabashaija’s case is likely exceptional, it suggests that the precarity and devastation wrought by the war may have encouraged some young Ugandans to join security institutions as they sought some certainty in these difficult circumstances.

Obote used the context of civil war to justify the widespread use of detention without trial and other forms of state-sponsored violence. As in the Amin years, the military and new paramilitary groups carried out most of the state's repression. Although the State Research Bureau (SRB), the Public Safety Unit, and Military Police had been disbanded, new groups took their place, including the notorious National Security Agency. Based in Nile Mansions, it operated as a secret police force, much like the General Service Unit and the SRB. There were also the UPC "functionaries," members of the UPC Youth Wing, and the *Kikosi Maalum*—a contingent of the army that had been formed in exile in Tanzania and was intensely loyal to Obote.⁶¹ These state security agencies utilized a variety of tactics to harass, seize, torture, and kill Ugandans, such as *panda gari* operations—named for the Swahili term to "get aboard"—which involved the mass roundup of civilians in large vehicles.⁶²

Encounters with these paramilitary groups often led to detention. There were three types of detainees in Uganda during the Obote II years: those held in UPS and, occasionally, district government prisons, such as Amin's ex-soldiers; those in the wartime detention camps; and those placed in safe houses and other sites of detention. The latter were held in military barracks, police stations, and "private" prisons run in the homes of government officials or military personnel.⁶³ Some had been used during the Amin years, such as Makindye Military Prison, Lubiri Barracks, and Nile Mansions Hotel. Others had only recently been repurposed, such as Argentina House—named in honor of the Argentinian military government's use of disappearance during the "Dirty War" of the 1970s—Park Hotel and Impala House in Kampala, Ihugu in Masindi, and Kamukuzi in Mbarara.⁶⁴

The Obote II regime detained a wide range of Ugandans. Unsurprisingly, many were politicians who opposed Obote, as well as prison officers, members of the military, and police officers viewed as disloyal.⁶⁵ Some detainees had already experienced detention previously, such as Pius Kawere, the lawyer who had defended Benedicto Kiwanuka during the Obote I regime. Kawere was detained in Mbuya Military Barracks in 1983 and held for four months. In his view, many of those detained alongside him had simply been taken to "extort money from relatives," reflecting the opportunistic nature of some detentions and how removed they had become from any semblance of legality.⁶⁶ A number of journalists were also detained, such as Ronald Kakooza Mutale, the editor of *Economy*.⁶⁷ While the majority of detainees were male, women were also detained. There were even accounts of

children being detained and killed in safe houses, including a group held at Makindye who had been arrested in their school uniforms.⁶⁸ The detention and death of children in these spaces reflects the brutal nature of state repression under Obote, who waged war against both opposing armies and civilians.

Detainees often moved through multiple spaces of confinement, experiencing firsthand the network of captivity and coercion. This was the case during the Obote II years as well as the governments that preceded him. Rashid, who was arrested during a *panda gari* operation in March of 1982 due to suspicions that he was a “rebel,” spent time in Makindye Military Barracks, Katabi Military Barracks, Central Police Station, and Upper Prison.⁶⁹ Similarly, Sula Kiwanuka, who testified before the CIVHR, explained how he was also moved around during his detention, going “from Nile Mansions to Argentina, Argentina to Mbuya, Mbuya to Luzira.” Ending up in Luzira remained, in the view of many detainees, a relief, just as it had during Amin’s time. “When we reached Luzira,” Kiwanuka expressed, “we started congratulating ourselves; we said we were lucky because some people did not reach Luzira.”⁷⁰ After spending an undisclosed period of time in Luzira, Kiwanuka was released. This multisite experience of detention was compounded for those who had been held during the Amin years, such as James Namakajo.⁷¹ He was detained again in April 1980 after returning from exile, arrested along with his father for alleged involvement in a plot to overthrow Binaisa.⁷² Over the course of this second round of detention, Namakajo was in Lubiri Barracks, where he “was so badly tortured” that he had to go to Mulago Hospital for treatment, followed by Makindye, where he had been detained in the 1970s.⁷³ Namakajo’s experience, which he recounted to the CIVHR, reflects how quickly an individual could go from having power within the state to being a target of state repression. Between the 1960s and 1980s, he was a member of the General Service Unit, an employee of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and Binaisa’s press secretary, and was also detained numerous times in multiple sites, including Makindye, Mutukula, Lubiri Barracks, Makerere Nursing Home, Bombo, Katikamu, and Luzira.⁷⁴

Conditions were terrible across these different sites of confinement, but they were particularly horrific in the safe houses. Testimonies about Argentina House, for example, indicate that all the detainees were crowded together in a room, stripped of their clothing, and left “more or less naked.”⁷⁵ Detainees reportedly had to “drink their own urine because it was the only water you could get.”⁷⁶ Many had severe injuries due to being tortured but did not receive any medical treatment. The death of detainees was a regular occurrence in Argentina House. Many were killed by state agents, and

others died through suffocation, as the “door was locked, the windows sealed, the ventilators sealed also, so there was no hope of any fresh air inside the place.”⁷⁷ There are also many accounts of Makindye in this period, which similarly tell of brutal violence and inhumane conditions. As former detainee Gideon Kisitu exclaimed, “The life I experienced in Makindye cell was death; at any time you could expect death.”⁷⁸ Detainees in Makindye not only had to worry about their own death but also confronted death directly. At times, they witnessed the murder of other detainees “before our very eyes” and also had to transport dead bodies from the cells.⁷⁹ There was reportedly a “mass grave” on the grounds of the barracks—the final resting place of many victims of the regime.⁸⁰

Of all the informal detention sites, Nile Mansions was arguably the most infamous. Originally built by Amin in advance of the Organization of African Unity Summit, the hotel became a meeting and office space in the Obote II years as well as a detention site, reflecting the entanglement of bureaucratic and coercive power.⁸¹ It also became Obote’s personal residence during his second presidency, a sign of the paranoia that consumed him at this time. As had been the case in Nakasero and Makindye, Nile Mansions was a space in which detainees were interrogated, tortured, and killed. According to former head housekeeper Sophia Margaret Banura, four rooms were used for these purposes: 311, 305, 320, and 326.⁸² Room 326 was the primary space in which extrajudicial killings took place. The presidential suite, where Obote lived in luxury, was on the floor below.⁸³ Obote was thus not only aware of these killings but also proximate to them, perhaps providing him with a macabre sense of reassurance. Once inside these rooms, detainees were subjected to a range of torture methods, including the use of “electrical gadgets, nail-studded slippers, hammers, pliers, plastic containers to melt over people and doors with metal hooks to close into bodies.”⁸⁴ Overall, Banura indicated that the scale of detention in Nile Mansions had become much worse under Obote II than it had been during the Amin years. “So many arrests were made,” she said. “We could see people being off-loaded from the vehicles, being dragged inside, beaten on the steps, bleeding, and being kept in the rooms.”⁸⁵ Another employee, Rutarindwa Mwene Barizeni, described how it felt as if the hotel “had been invaded by a vampire feeding on human blood and flesh.”⁸⁶

Godfrey (pseudonym), who had worked in UPS since the 1960s, was unexpectedly detained in Nile Mansions in 1983. While answering a routine interview question about how long he had worked in the prison system, Godfrey began to speak openly about his dismissal and detention in the 1980s. His experience illustrates the ways in which the line between public

employee and prisoner was often precarious in this period. Godfrey explained how his colleagues had accused him of stealing a machine and then labeled him a rebel. “You know, I had a very good house [in Luweero]. . . . They thought that Museveni used to stay in the house and put some meeting from there,” he remarked. Referring to government security agents, he continued, “They used to come and pick people, randomly, that’s why they picked me, accused me that . . . rebels, they are sitting in my house.” From his perspective, the wartime environment enabled the government to detain people arbitrarily and easily. “They could pick anybody, if somebody doesn’t like you,” he commented, they would label you a *myeekera*, or “rebel.” Getting that label, Godfrey explained, was “terrible, deadly. . . . Nobody would want to come close to you.”⁸⁷

Following this accusation, Godfrey was taken to Nile Mansions. When asked to describe his experience there, he exclaimed, “Oh! That’s a deadly place. They used to kill about forty people every night.” He spent six months in the hotel, stating that he was often crammed into a room with approximately one hundred other detainees. One day, however, there was a “rumour that international people were coming to check whether Obote was keeping people in prison, in these Nile Mansions,” Godfrey remarked. As a result, he and many other detainees were moved to Luzira. His former UPS colleagues provided him with support during this time, including informing his family that he was now in Luzira. “They didn’t know that I was there,” he explained. “My family thought that I was killed.” Once his family knew he was alive, Godfrey said they started to advocate for his release. Although the exact timeline isn’t clear based on his recollections, Godfrey seems to have been released at some point in 1983. He recalls hearing his name read from a list of those who were being freed, as a government official proclaimed, “Government has spent a lot of money to you, so government has pardoned you, you can go.” As was the case under previous governments, the Obote II regime regularly released detainees and prisoners en masse, affecting Godfrey and many others. While Godfrey expressed his gratitude towards his colleagues in Luzira for how they had supported him, he resented those UPS officers who had accused him in the first place, forever tainting his relationship with the institution. His anger still evident years later, Godfrey exclaimed, “I didn’t want to go back because they had spoiled my life. . . . I hate the place, I hate the department!”⁸⁸

Today, memories of the violence of Nile Mansions have been central to both personal and public reflections on the Obote II years. Barizeni, the former employee of the hotel mentioned earlier, has written a book about the atrocities that occurred there. “The detention and killing of

captives in the Nile Mansions during the second regime of Obote was the highest order of violations of human rights,” he wrote. “Some of the people who were involved in these acts are still alive,” he continued, and should be “asked to explain to the world for the good of the human race why all these atrocities took place under their leadership.”⁸⁹ In an exhibition entitled “Nile Mansions Hotel,” Ugandan artist Bathesheba Okwenje—who lived at the hotel as a child due to her father’s position in the government—reflects on the “cogency of history, story and memory.” Presented as an archive, the work overlays her family’s experience with news clippings and other materials from the Obote II years. In her artist’s statement, she writes:

I was seven or eight, I think. We were living on the third floor of the Nile Mansions Hotel. One night they fired bombs and grenades at us. My father looked out of the window and told us that we were under siege. He tried to protect us with his body. This is my memory. My sister does not remember this. She remembers that we lived above a torture chamber. Once, she’d leaned over the balcony railing to look at the floor below. She saw a soldier leaning on the blunt end of a bayonet, eating lunch. The pointed end was in the back of a man lying on the ground. I don’t remember this.⁹⁰

Okwenje’s words speak to the combination of visibility and secrecy that characterized Nile Mansions, as well as the ways in which traumatic memories of these difficult periods are experienced differently. She and Barizeni both act as witnesses to the violence, sharing their stories while also reflecting upon the horrific violence of the Obote II years.

Along with being put into safe houses, many of those detained in this period went to government prisons. One of the most significant features of this period was Obote’s unprecedented use of the Public Order and Security Act. Amin’s decrees regarding arrest and detention had been repealed in the aftermath of the war, and, rather than renewing them, Obote returned to this familiar piece of legislation.⁹¹ Initially, this may have been an attempt to hold on to a “semblance of legality,” as the act had been used before, but it quickly became clear that there was no interest in upholding the law.⁹² Obote’s decision could also be explained by his desire to distract from his use of safe houses and more brutal mechanisms, perhaps as part of his attempt to present himself as a law-abiding civilian leader. Regardless, Obote relied heavily on the act throughout his second presidency, particularly once the armed resistance movements started to pose a threat to his power. “After 1981,” the CIVHR report indicated, “it can be said that the Government decided not

merely to use the Public Order and Security Act 1967, but to deliberately abuse it. Faced with widespread political dissent and military insurgency, the Government resorted to holding all sorts of people in custody.”⁹³

Most of the people detained through the act ended up in Luzira. The commission’s report offered a typology of the detainees held there at this time: the police and security officers who were viewed as being disloyal to the Uganda People’s Congress (UPC), prominent persons who were considered a threat, and those rounded up through military and *panda gari* operations.⁹⁴ Many of Amin’s former soldiers and paramilitary agents—some of whom were not released until Okello Lutwa overthrew Obote in 1985—were also there.⁹⁵ Luzira was filled with detainees who occupied a liminal position, cast as enemies of past and present regimes. In his testimony to the CIVHR, former commissioner of prisons Barnabus Byabazaire stated that there were 630 detainees held with detention orders at Upper Prison between 1981 and 1985 and 4,255 “lodgers” who were admitted without detention orders.⁹⁶ Over half of these were detained between 1982 and 1983, corresponding with the Obote II regime’s major mobilization against the NRA.⁹⁷ Providing further evidence about the scale of detention at Luzira, Amnesty International reported that 1,142 detainees were held in Luzira alone in July of 1984.⁹⁸ There are, however, no official UPS records available for this period. The absence of a paper trail for these individuals was likely deliberate, as the state did not want to draw attention to the scale of detention without trial.

One of the main effects of the rising number of detainees was that prison conditions—which were already very poor due to the realities of wartime and the influx of “Amin’s soldiers”—continued to deteriorate. During the Obote II years, government prisons were spaces of extreme neglect and scarcity. Based on the evidence available, the situation within government prisons was even more dire than it had been in the Amin years, with prisoners literally starving to death. The latter was in part due to the widespread destruction of prison farms, which severely curtailed the food supply. Furthermore, in the wartime environment, the government did not make feeding prisoners a priority, reflecting how this group was abandoned by the state.

Many accounts from this period speak to the grim realities within prisons. In his testimony to the CIVHR, former assistant commissioner of police Pascal Byron Bitariho discussed the desperate environment at Luzira, where he was held for two years. While he stated that “there was no physical torture,” he indicated that the “detainees were rarely fed, sometimes one meal in three days.” Bitariho also stated that they had “no access

to medical treatment” and were “locked up for inordinately long periods.” Some of his colleagues, he claimed, died from “starvation” or due to lack of medical treatment.⁹⁹ *Munnansi* also interviewed several detainees who were released after Obote’s overthrow. A former high-ranking police officer by the name of Mohamed characterized conditions in Luzira as “horrible,” with “very poor and rare meals and inadequate medical care which led to the death of many.”¹⁰⁰ Unlike Pascal, he indicated that he had suffered “physical violence” as well as “innumerable mental tortures.”¹⁰¹ While violence was by no means absent from UPS prisons in this period, the majority of the evidence available indicates that it was not carried out in a systematic way, as had been the case during the Amin years. Echoing some of the findings of the CIVHR, Amnesty International reported that “conditions are said to be poor” in Luzira, but that “those held in civil prisons are unlikely to be tortured.”¹⁰² Conversely, they stated that “all but a few of those detained in military custody are tortured.”¹⁰³

As they did in the 1960s and 1970s, Ugandans criticized and contested the state’s use of detention. Much of this emanated from *Munnansi*. Numerous articles describing the horrific conditions at UPS prisons, with headlines such as “Obote’s Regime Starved Prisoners to Death,” were printed in the Obote II years.¹⁰⁴ One of the most scathing condemnations appeared in December 1984 in an op-ed piece entitled “Detention is Detrimental to Democracy.” Taking aim at Obote, it read, “The obnoxious and abhorred Public Order and Security Act of 1967 popularly known as DETENTION ORDER found a place in our law books during the dark years of our independence in 1967. It was an ACT born and bred out of fear, used in fear to spread fear, despondency and alarm.”¹⁰⁵ The sense of moral outrage towards these practices was also evident in an article published in July of 1983. Critiquing the government’s use of detention and UPS’s complicity in this process, the author wrote, “Is it fair and, more important, legal to admit persons to Luzira contrary to laid down procedures and in violations of Uganda’s laws? Is it proper for Luzira to accept remands from other magisterial areas and keep them without arranging for their return . . . ? Who is ultimately responsible for these malpractices?”¹⁰⁶ Such critiques indicated the widespread confusion surrounding the government’s detention practices, through which the lines between legal and illegal, private and public had yet again been blurred.

Detainees and their families also resisted through the courts. Between 1979 and 1985, nearly eight hundred cases of “unlawful detention” or “unlawful imprisonment” appear in the High Court records—reflecting both the state’s systematic use of detention in this period and the extent to which Ugandans contested it.¹⁰⁷ While the number of unlawful detentions was

undoubtedly much higher than what is recorded in the archives, the High Court files offer an unprecedented level of detail about who was detained, the process of their arrest, and how that detention was challenged through the court system. These archival materials are significant not only for the insight they provide into the scale of these arrests and who was affected by them but also because they show the ways in which Ugandans sought to challenge the detention of their family members through the court system. Even in a context of political upheaval, people turned to government institutions as a way of challenging the arbitrariness of the regime, much as many Ugandan women had done in the 1970s when faced with the disappearance of family members.¹⁰⁸ Similar cases had been brought to court in the 1960s and 1970s, but they didn't occur on a scale close to that of the early to mid 1980s.

Many cases involved a writ of habeas corpus, which put pressure on the government to produce the detainee in court and thereby begin due process. As in the Obote I years, the government evaded the court. As described by the CIVHR, "The High Court of Uganda started being inundated with applications of Habeas Corpus. . . . The applications became so many soon authorities in Government were overwhelmed by them. They thus resorted to resisting or totally ignoring Court Orders."¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Makerere law student M. Abwoch-Oloya argued that the "executive has found itself interfering with the ruling of the court cases of detention," thereby undermining the function of habeas corpus as a mechanism "to protect against unlawful detention."¹¹⁰ As a result, there was a "systematic violation of the basic legal and constitutional rights of the detainees" throughout the Obote II years.¹¹¹

Others sued for damages, seeking some form of redress for the various ways that detention had impacted their lives. Evaristi, a police officer, sued for 269,000 shillings in damages on account of his arrest, assault, and detention by government soldiers in 1981. The damages accounted for personal items that had been taken from him by the soldiers, "money spent by his wife looking for him," and "money spent on receiving medical treatment following his detention." Evaristi was reportedly held for a week in Mbarara Military Barracks, then Katabi Military Barracks, and finally Luzira Military Barracks. According to his file, he had "never been gazetted as a detainee and no reason was given for his detention."¹¹² While such cases primarily demonstrate material losses, they also hint at the trauma experienced by those in detention. Another man by the name of John—who claimed damages amounting to 2,927,900 shillings—was allegedly arrested with a friend in May 1983 at his home by "about thirty Army men." According to the case file, the soldiers "entered the plaintiff's home [and] ordered both Plaintiffs

to put up their hands and hustled them down the flight of steps in a state of panic.” While sitting “on the dirty ground” next to an army vehicle, the men were allegedly kicked and hit with the butts of the soldiers’ guns.¹¹³ Although these two men were let go after a few hours, their experience is typical of the initial encounter between security agents and those who ended up in detention.

Beyond the government prisons and safe houses, captivity in the Obote II period was also marked by another new phenomenon: wartime detention camps. Various described as “internment camps,” “reception centres,” and “military detention camps,” these sites were created to manage and punish the civilian population in the Luweero Triangle who were already dealing with brutal violence at the hands of government soldiers. Over the course of the war, approximately 150,000 civilians were held in these camps, which were guarded by Obote’s Uganda National Liberation Army and the Military Police.¹¹⁴ The government insisted camp detainees could come and go as they pleased and that these sites were built for their own protection.¹¹⁵ For example, an article with the headline “No Internment Camps in Uganda” appeared in a July 1983 edition of the *Uganda Times*, in which the government maintained that “People in Luweero District report to certain centres voluntarily for protection against the attacks by bandits.”¹¹⁶ Such discourses of “protection” have long been used by governments to justify confinement in the context of wartime, from Cuba and South Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the more recent US-led “War on Terror.”¹¹⁷ In Uganda, as in these comparative cases, confinement served a punitive rather than protective function.

Much more critical accounts of the camps come from independent media sources, civil society reports, and those who were detained within them. Overwhelmingly, these accounts emphasize the horror within the camps. “An eerie cloud of doom hangs threateningly over all people who were rounded up and forced into the so called refugee camps in Mpigi and Luweero District,” one *Munnansi* author wrote. “Reports have revealed that the people in these camps are virtually prisoners, and, according to one source, they are living ghosts with no future at all.”¹¹⁸ Other materials provided specific details of the type of treatment detainees received. Amnesty International reported that “displaced people in this area were housed in large camps under army guards,” in which many women and girls were raped and “kept forcibly by the soldiers for repeated sexual abuse.”¹¹⁹ Former detainees corroborate this. Both Sulaimani Sentongo and George William Kakande were held in a camp at Ndejje Boys Primary School in 1983, along with approximately six hundred other detainees. While in the camp, they

saw UNLA soldiers remove women temporarily from the camp and reportedly rape them. They also testified that “many camp inmates were killed by soldiers and others died due to bad conditions in the camp.”¹²⁰

As was the case with safe houses, some camp detainees were brought to government prisons, further demonstrating the connected nature of Uganda’s carceral network. One UPS officer described the “horrifying sight” of the detainees’ arrival at Luzira, emphasizing that “most prisoners had been starved and had contracted diseases.”¹²¹ “One cannot presently believe these are persons,” another officer remarked, echoing the statements of staff in the Amin years who encountered former “lodgers.” *Munnansi* described this group of former detainees as the “the real lucky ones, having been literally dug out of their death holes.”¹²² While there is still much research that needs to be done into these and the NRA camps, it is clear that these were places of violence, deprivation, and death.

By bringing this period into sharper focus, we can see the connections between different periods in Uganda’s postcolonial history. The Obote II years saw the reemergence of the Public Order and Security Act as a major force in public life, echoing the pattern that had emerged in the late 1960s. Yet, Obote also used informal detention sites in a way that borrowed heavily from Amin’s punitive repertoire. The outbreak of civil war intensified this trend, resulting in heightened recriminations against the civilian population, including the creation of wartime detention camps in the Luweero Triangle. This period was also marked by the unchecked growth of Uganda’s detainee population, resulting in dire conditions in Luzira and other UPS facilities.



When Tito Okello Lutwa’s troops overthrew Obote in July 1985, Ugandans experienced another violent change of power. Like his predecessors, Okello Lutwa released the majority of Obote’s detainees when he took over. In a speech marking the amnesty of more than one thousand prisoners, the new minister of affairs adopted a familiar refrain. As reported by *Munnansi*, he declared that releasing prisoners was the government’s “top priority,” as this would help to “ensure that innocent Ugandans enjoy liberty in their country.”¹²³ Okello Lutwa followed up with a plea for peace, apparently stating that he was “tired of blood-letting” and appealing to the various rebel groups to “lay down their arms and join hands with the government to work for the reconstruction of the nation.”¹²⁴ Yet, his government continued to detain and torture people in places such as Nile Mansions.¹²⁵ Others were held in Luzira, continuing previous patterns.¹²⁶ Okello Lutwa’s presidency was short

lived, with Museveni coming to power less than six months later. Museveni's inauguration marked the end of military coups within Uganda for the time being, but it did not bring an end to war, political violence, or the use of detention without trial.

The period between Amin's overthrow and Museveni's rise to power was one of the most violent and tumultuous in Uganda's postcolonial history. With each rise and fall of the government, prisoners and detainees were released and quickly replaced by newfound "enemies." Using the context of wartime as a justification, all the regimes relied heavily on detention without trial, torture, and murder by soldiers and paramilitary agents. Confinement took place in multiple sites, all of which were marked by deplorable conditions. Safe houses and detention camps were also spaces of systematic torture and extrajudicial killings. Despite these extreme circumstances, Ugandans continued to challenge the state's use of captivity through the courts, the media, and within spaces of confinement. As the government found new ways to exert its power, people pushed back—a dynamic that continues to characterize the punitive arena in Uganda to this day.

Conclusion

Contested Pasts, Contested Futures

WHILE FIGHTING a guerrilla war in the 1980s, Museveni and the National Resistance Movement (NRM) also waged a propaganda war against the Obote II government.¹ Unsurprisingly, representations of prisons, other sites of confinement, and punishment played a role. As previous postcolonial governments had done, the NRM sought to frame the current government's punitive practices as immoral and backwards, drawing attention to the "systematic" killings of Ugandans, the "brutal repression and suppression of human rights," and the "total disregard for the Rule of Law." They focused on Obote's use of incarceration, decrying how "innocent citizens" were "arbitrarily abducted and kept in prisons, army barracks, and in the private houses and offices of Obote's officials." The Uganda Prisons Service (UPS), along with many other state institutions, was portrayed as completely dysfunctional. Echoing the arc that has shaped some prison officers' own telling of their institution's history, the NRM proclaimed: "Our prisons which once boasted high standards of management and administration have now sunk so low that they definitely rank among the worst. They have now become no more than places of torture, starvation and death." As a result, the NRM leadership promised that UPS would be "built afresh" when they came to power.²

Carceral Afterlives traces the history of the state's use of incarceration between independence and Museveni's inauguration, leaving out the story of Museveni's presidency. This period forms a new and still unfolding chapter

in Uganda's history, as Museveni and the NRM have been in power for over three and a half decades. Drawing on the rhetoric that helped propel it to power, the NRM has focused on implementing a policy of human rights-based reforms in Uganda's prisons. This reflects wider practices across the continent from the 1990s onwards, as an emphasis on human rights replaced earlier penal paradigms.³ Consequently, UPS introduced an "Open Door" policy in 2000, inviting external organizations to examine its sites and suggest improvements, which led to millions of dollars of foreign funding.⁴ The most significant shift, however, was the passage of the Prisons Act in July 2006. Along with permanently merging local and central government prisons, this act sought to make "effective and humane modern penal policy and universally accepted international standards" the basis of UPS's operations.⁵ In language reflecting the zeitgeist of the time, UPS subsequently declared itself to be a "centre of excellence in providing human rights based correctional services in Africa."⁶ As Canon Dr. Johnson Byabashaija—the current commissioner of UPS—emphasized, "All, *all* our correction services and programs are based on human rights. Human rights is the biggest consideration when we are rehabilitating people, when we are incarcerating people."⁷ The official media has, unsurprisingly, celebrated this policy, representing UPS as the "best" prison service on the African continent.⁸

Civil society organizations and scholars have provided more critical appraisals. In their 2011 investigation into Uganda's prisons, Human Rights Watch emphasized the limits of such reforms. While it credited the Prisons Act, international partnerships, and UPS's overall shift in approach with improving conditions in larger prisons, it insisted that there were still many prisons where "the conditions and treatment rise to the level of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and even torture."⁹ Scholar Tomas Martin has argued that the human rights reforms have changed "prison practices in Uganda for the better," but that "violence, paramilitary control, custodial imperatives and pragmatic rule-bending" have been "updated in newfound and modern forms."¹⁰ Along with showing the limits of such reforms—a pattern that can be seen in prison systems across time and space—these assessments provide a glimpse of the ways in which past practices and policies live on in the Museveni era.

Despite the NRM's emphasis on rebirth, there are striking continuities between past and present governments when it comes to punishment. Incarceration continues to be a tool for punishing dissent, used against opposition politicians such as Robert Kyagulanyi—known as Bobi Wine—and Kizza Besigye, scholars such as Stella Nyanzi, and many others.¹¹ Within prisons, overcrowding remains acute. There has, however, been some effort

to alleviate this during the COVID-19 pandemic through early releases and pardons.¹² Additionally, as in the past, a significant proportion of the population is on remand, awaiting trials that often take years to materialize. As Byabashaija shared with the media in 2017, the percentage of remand prisoners in Uganda's prisons was the highest in East Africa at that time, making up 52 percent of the overall incarcerated population.¹³ This is in part due to structural issues in the court system, which led to a backlog of cases.¹⁴ The physical sites of UPS also remain largely unchanged, with many prison buildings from the colonial period used to this day, including those at Luzira.

Past practices continue to shape other areas of the punitive arena. The military and the police, for example, have both played a central role in the NRM's governmentality. This has been particularly clear through their violent treatment of civilians during elections, including the brutal tactics used recently against Bobi Wine's supporters in the context of the 2021 election, which resulted in protests and criticisms within Uganda and beyond.¹⁵ Furthermore, while the 1995 constitution banned the practice of "detention without trial" and the use of safe houses, both still exist.¹⁶ Civil society organizations and foreign governments have reported that official and unofficial security groups continue to detain, torture, and kill Ugandans in safe houses. These can be found in places such as Nakasero and Mbuya in Kampala, therefore mapping onto older geographies of punishment.¹⁷ Ultimately, Uganda's carceral system has retained its recursive nature and remains an assemblage of penal practices and approaches from the colonial period and the first few decades following independence.

Whether in Uganda, the United States, or other parts of the globe, prisons and other spaces of captivity are sites of deprivation and violence, places designed to take away an individual's freedom. The history of prisons—from their "birth" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through their expansion in colonial empires, persistence in the wake of independence, and current status as epicenters of mass incarceration and the COVID-19 pandemic—is a story of staggering continuity. Prison systems around the world have been through many cycles of scandal, shock, and reform. While some changes have been introduced—changes that have at times had a concrete and positive impact on the lives of individuals behind bars—prisons remain sites of violence, racism, and the degradation of human dignity. In the wake of the brutal murder of George Floyd in May of 2020—one of countless killings of Black people by police in the United States—and the subsequent outpouring of support for the Black Lives Matter movement across the globe, a growing number of people are taking up long-standing

calls for the defunding and abolition of police and prisons. This is not only happening in the United States, where it has long been led by Black scholars and activists, but also around the globe, including on the African continent. As discussed earlier, the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria is one key example of this push for change, and there have also been protests in Uganda against police brutality, arbitrary arrests, and detention.¹⁸

The outcomes of this critical moment of reckoning remain unknown. In these contests over the prison's future, the past offers important insights. Such histories show us how we arrived at this moment of the prison's universality. As this book has outlined, we must not only pay attention to the prison's "birth," colonial expansion, or current crisis of mass incarceration and widespread detention, but also trace what happened as colonial empires broke apart. As countries gained their independence across the Global South—from Haiti in the early nineteenth century to South Africa in the 1990s—postcolonial states overwhelmingly retained rather than dismantled colonial penal systems. The prison is thus a key part of colonialism's afterlife, continuing to shape the dynamics of state power in Uganda and in other postcolonial societies.¹⁹ Its ongoing existence, therefore, is part of the unfinished work of decolonization. While there have been new registers and reforms, the history of postcolonial penal systems in Uganda and across the African continent has been one of persistence rather than rupture. There are many reasons for this, including the ways in which prisons serve the coercive, material, and symbolic needs of state power. This has allowed the prison and wider practices of captivity to endure across centuries and continents, with devastating consequences for those held within spaces of confinement. As societies imagine a different future, one in which prisons no longer exist, it is this history that will need to be confronted and overcome.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER 2: A NATIONAL PRISONS SERVICE

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CHAPTER 4: DETENTION AND DISSENT IN THE OBOTE I YEARS

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 Interview with David.* May 26, 2019.
 Interview with Bukirwa.* May 28, 2019.
 Interview with Leonard Kigonya's sister. May 29, 2019.
 Interview with Leonard Kigonya's son. May 29, 2019.
 Interview with Canon Dr. Johnson Byabashaija. May 31, 2019.
 Interview with Richard.* May 31, 2019.

ARCHIVES AND PERSONAL COLLECTIONS

Note: Many district government collections in Uganda have recently been moved to the Uganda National Archives (UNA) in Wandegaya. Some of these collections were consulted at UNA, while others were consulted in their original location.

Uganda

Africana Collection, Makerere University Library, Makerere University
 Benedicto K. M. Kiwanuka Papers
 Central Police Station Archives, Kampala
 Gulu District Archives, Gulu
 High Court of Uganda Archive, Kampala (accessible at the UNA)
 Hoima District Archives, Mountains of the Moon University
 Jinja District Archives, Jinja
 Kabale District Archives, Kabale
 Kabarole District Archives, Mountains of the Moon University
 Kotido District Archives, Kampala (accessible at UNA)
 Mbale District Archives, Kampala (accessible at UNA)
 Moroto District Archives, Kampala (accessible at UNA)
 Personal Collection of Joseph Etima
 Personal Collection of Moses Kamugisha
 Prisons Academy and Training School Library, Luzira, Kampala
 Rubaga Cathedral Archives, Kampala
 Tooro Kingdom Archives, Mountains of the Moon University
 Uganda National Archives Library, Kampala
 Uganda Parliamentary Library, Kampala
 Uganda Prisons Service Record Centre, Luzira, Kampala

South Africa

Bailey's African History Archive, Johannesburg

United Kingdom

Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library, University of London
 Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick
 Royal Commonwealth Society, University of Cambridge Library
 United Kingdom National Archives, London

Online Archival Databases

Associated Press Archive, <http://www.aparchive.com/>.

British Online Archives, <https://microform.digital/boa/>.

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CNN

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Daily Monitor

Daily Telegraph

Drum

Guardian

Mail & Guardian

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New Vision

New York Times

Observer

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