

Mark Leopold

## Idi Amin. Icon of Evil

Dr. Mark Leopold is currently working on a biography on Idi Amin. In this article, a shortened version of his 'Sex, Violence and History in the Lives of Idi Amin Postcolonial Masculinity as Masquerade'<sup>1</sup> he analyses different stereotypes surrounding Ugandan dictator Idi Amin.

Idi Amin Dada, President of Uganda from 1971-1979, has become an icon of contemporary evil. He is usually the only African discussed in popular books with titles such as *The most evil men and women in history* or *The world's most evil dictators*.<sup>2</sup> Amin's name has become a universal point of reference whenever African political dictatorship is mentioned. Since his death (in exile in Saudi Arabia) in 2003, his reputation has, if anything, grown bigger, particularly since the Oscar winning movie *The last king of Scotland* (2006).

Most Ugandans and historians of Uganda agree that Amin's rule was a crucial period in the collapse of Ugandan society. The main reasons for this were the economic destruction caused by his expulsion of almost all the Asian population of the country, the internal disorder created as a result of undisciplined military rule, and his habit of making powerful external enemies, both in East Africa and internationally. However most analysts, Ugandan and Euro-American, also agree that Amin's predecessor and successor, Milton Obote, was responsible for at least as many, if not more, deaths than Amin.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, unlike Obote during his second regime, Amin did not specifically set out to wipe out entire civilian populations defined on tribal grounds. Nor is Obote's earlier expulsion of the Kenyan Luo remembered alongside Amin's of the Asians, although the former were considerably larger in number.

- 1 This article is a shortened version of the article: 'Sex, violence and history in the lives of Idi Amin postcolonial masculinity as Masquerade' *Journal of postcolonial writing* 45.2 (2009) 321-330.
- 2 Diane Law, *The world's most evil dictators* (Bath 2006), Miranda Twiss, *The most evil men and women in history* (London 2002).
- 3 See, for example, the introduction to Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle ed., *Uganda now* (London 1988) 1-25.

## Leopold

Genocide is not the word for Amin's rule; it was far more chaotic than that. He simply killed or caused the killings of those who got in his way, while allowing his troops considerable licence to carry out personal grudges and further their economic aims. Although Amin specifically targeted soldiers from the Acholi and Langi tribes in the army, because he suspected their loyalty was to Obote, he never undertook mass pogroms against Acholi or Langi



Map of Uganda. From: NationMaster, <http://maps.nationmaster.com> (consulted on 29th of October 2010).

civilians in their home areas. Obote, on the other hand *did* attempt to exterminate large, racially-defined groups of civilians, both in the West Nile itself and among the Baganda of the Luwero Triangle in the south of the country.<sup>4</sup> The description of Amin by the British writer Dennis Hills, who was jailed and nearly executed for writing it, as a 'village tyrant' is not the whole truth.<sup>5</sup> Amin was certainly more than that. But it is a whole lot closer to the truth that depicting him as a Hitler-like monster. And meanwhile Obote has never been portrayed as an icon of African evil for our time.

Why is this? It is easy to see Amin as a figure, who all too conveniently fits colonial stereotypes of 'the African'; violent, uneducated, 'primitive', a fantasy figure exemplifying the image of the continent as a 'heart of darkness'. The popular image of Amin unites many of our society's ideas about the nature of evil, fitting a Western folk model. However, as I will show, African intellectuals and writers have been key actors in developing this image. First, however, it is necessary to deal briefly with the mere reality of Amin's activities; In fact much less important than the fantasy stories about him.

4 Ibidem.

5 Dennis Hills, *The white pumpkin* (London 1975) 333.

One reason for the image is that Obote was always a modernist, with scant respect for African tradition. He could speak the language of world diplomacy, and that of socialism. Amin, an uneducated soldier with an accent, painful to the southern Ugandan ear, not only seemed to be a primitive reversion but seemed to glory in such a role. He immediately became famous in Britain for his grandiose anti-colonial statements (often, it seems, deliberately rather than accidentally funny), delivered in an English quickly parodied, notably by Alan Coren in his long-running column in *Punch* magazine.<sup>6</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to see Amin's image as simply a kneejerk response of British racism, although some African commentators did portray it as such. In fact, some of the most caricatured pictures of Amin as a primitive reversion came from African writers, some of whom indeed celebrated such an image as much as he did himself. This image of tribal atavism runs through virtually all the massive literature on Amin. Throughout his rule and since, both his supporters and his detractors emphasised the point that he was a creature of his ethnicity: that the source and inspiration of his regime lay in his heredity. This worked in two ways: in the more popular texts, a racist anthropology related Amin's atrocities to the traditional ways of his tribe; in the more academic work, his origins link his actions through deep, perhaps submerged, historical roots, to aspects of the Nile Valley 'or the wider' African past.

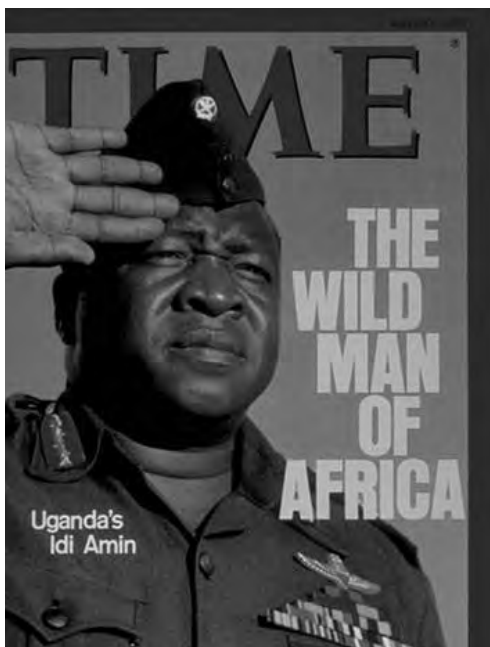
In the first place, suitable for a fantasy figure, there is some dispute over Amin's precise origins, although he is always associated with the West Nile district of Northwest Uganda. Most accounts suggest that he was born in the small town of Koboko, very close to both the Congo and Sudanese borders, he had a Muslim father from the Kakwa tribe and a Lugbara mother. In the cruder work, the Kakwa are depicted as particularly ferocious. Amin's former Commanding Officer in the British Army calls them a 'warrior tribe' and tells us that they and other West Nile tribes engaged in 'sacrifices of animals and humans.'<sup>7</sup> Henry Kyemba, a Baganda who worked for Amin as a senior civil servant and cabinet minister, and whose book was a major source for *The last king of Scotland*, goes further still:

6 See, for example Alan Coren, *The collected bulletins of president Idi Amin* (London 1974).

7 Iain Grahame, *Amin and Uganda, a Personal Memoir* (London 1980) 9.

8 *Ibidem*, 12.

'Amin's bizarre behaviour (...) derives partly from his tribal background. Like many other warrior societies, the Kakwa, Amin's tribe, are known to have practised blood rituals on slain enemies. These involve cutting a piece of flesh from the body to subdue the dead man's spirit or tasting the victim's blood to render the spirit harmless (...). Such rituals still exist among the Kakwa. If they kill a man, it is their practice to insert a knife in the body and touch the bloody blade to their lips (...)



Idi Amin 'The wild man of Africa' on the cover of Time magazine. Reproduction from: The Source Cafe, <http://source.co.ug> (consulted on 29th of october 2010).

I have reason to believe that Amin's practices do not stop at tasting blood: on several occasions he has boasted to me and others that he has eaten human flesh (...) he went on to say that eating human flesh is not uncommon in his home area.<sup>9</sup>

George Ivan Smith wrote that 'there is strong evidence that Amin and his henchmen did engage in this sort of thing, but as an instrument of terror, not as a tribal custom.'<sup>10</sup> He goes on and describes Amin as 'a boy wrung from the withers of the tribes around the West Nile, drawn in from the twilight of the witchcraft and the superstition surrounding them.'<sup>11</sup> He explains that 'people in thin, arid places such as the Kakwa area of Uganda would engage... in shedding of the blood of animals or even human beings. The witchcraft in which blood is shed is stronger than the witchcraft of berries and roots'<sup>12</sup>, and that 'Amin's mother was a Lugbara. She was known to be

9 Henry Kyemba, *A state of blood: the inside story of Idi Amin* (London 1977) 109-110.

10 George Ivan Smith, *Ghosts of Kampala* (London 1980) 34.

11 Ibidem, 37.

12 Ibidem, 40.

steeped in witchcraft, consulted by soldiers from the barracks for that, and for other services.’<sup>13</sup>

Another approach is to explain the supposed violence of the West Nilers in terms of the relatively stateless, acephalous nature of their traditional societies.<sup>14</sup> Amin’s first biographer, the Anglo-Irish aristocrat Lady Listowel, perhaps unsurprisingly, traces the problems to Amin’s lack of social advantages:

‘The Kakwa have a great respect for personalities, but not for rank or position. They never had chiefs or recognised clan leaders... Amin was brought up to believe that all Kakwa tribesmen are equal (....) Some of his recent measures illustrate all too well that he had to leap from a peasant background into the complicated politics of the modern world without any intermediate feudal preparation.’<sup>15</sup>

If the ‘Kakwa’-based explanations in Mahmoud Mamdani’s damning phrase, were ‘parading Amin as some sort of anthropological oddity’,<sup>16</sup> another set of explanations based on his West Nile background portrayed him as an *historical* oddity, a resurgence of primeval African tradition. The first contact the people of West Nile had with outsiders possessing radically different technologies came with slave raids in the first half of the nineteenth century, carried out by groups of soldiers, most of whom were themselves slaves, who would seize children and adults to refresh their ranks, or for onward sale in the slave markets of North Africa and the Middle East. Western powers, particularly Britain which had its own aims in the region, sought to stamp out the practice, and by the 1870s, the Anglo-Egyptian regime which theoretically ruled the area which was to become the Sudan, sent armed forces, many of whom were themselves former slave soldiers. One such group was commanded by a German doctor, a converted Muslim, known as Emin Pasha. In the late 1880s, an Islamic insurrection, known to colonial history as the Mahdi’s rebellion, caused Emin Pasha and his troops to be driven up the Nile to the area which later became known as West Nile.

In 1889, Emin was ‘rescued’ by the explorer Henry Stanley, in a major international media event which became the inspiration for Joseph Conrad’s

13 Ibidem, 42.

14 An acephalous society (from the Greek for ‘headless’) is a society which lacks political leaders or hierarchies (red.).

15 Judith Listowel, *Amin* (Dublin and London 1973) 12.

16 Mahmoud Mamdani, *Imperialism and fascism in Uganda* (London 1983) 32.

## Leopold

novella *Heart of Darkness*, Most of Emin's soldiers remained behind, to be picked up a few years later by Captain Frederick Lugard of the Imperial British East Africa Company. Lugard regarded these people as 'the best material for soldiery in Africa', and he used them in his successful attempt to carve out what was to become modern Uganda. They became known as 'Nubi' or 'Nubians'. Many of them were later integrated into the Fourth Battalion of the King's African Rifles (4 KAR) and fought for the British in East Africa and elsewhere. From the days of the slave armies, they had been Muslims and, in fact if not in theory, the identity became one which many West Nile Ugandans and others adopted when they moved to towns, became traders or joined the army, providing they converted to Islam, and spoke KiNubi (a form of vernacular Arabic) and/or KiSwahili.<sup>17</sup>

Others inherited the status. Like his father, Idi Amin was a Nubi, born and brought up in the British Army, and many commentators have seen his Nubi roots as determining, in part, his violent behaviour, just as others explained it in terms of his Kakwa nature. The journalist David Martin, for example, says in his 1974 biography of Amin that:

'Among their fellow countrymen they enjoyed an unenviable reputation of having one of the world's highest homicide rates. The Nubians were renowned for their sadistic brutality, lack of formal education, for poisoning enemies and for their refusal to integrate, even in the urban centres.'<sup>18</sup>

Grahame, who, as Amin's Commanding Officer in 4 KAR, commanded many Nubian troops, gives this gloss on Nubi history:

'For close on twenty years [after Lugard took them into his forces] the Nubians became the most feared and influential ethnic group in Uganda, mercilessly suppressing uprisings and tribal disputes at the behest of their British masters. It was the success of these early operations that gave them contempt for all pagan and Christian tribes in the country.'<sup>19</sup>

Thus one can explain Amin's violence by either the Kakwa's traditional lack of a state, or the Nubi's historical involvement in the colonial state. Some writers are unsure whether murder and cannibalism are characteristically Kakwa or Nubi phenomena. Smith tells us that:

17 On the history of the Nubi, see: Mark Leopold, 'Legacies of slavery in north west Uganda: the story of the "One-Elevens"' *Africa* 76.2 (2006) 180-199.

18 David Martin, *General Amin* (London 1974) 14.

19 Grahame, *Amin and Uganda, a Personal Memoir*, 9.

‘The southern Ugandans are particularly contemptuous of the southern Sudanese and Nubis (not of other northern tribes) as wild and uncivilised. It is from them that we have reports of Amin and his Nubis tasting the blood of their victims and eating their livers and the explanation that such a custom is either a Nubi or a Kakwa one.’<sup>20</sup>

Another, key set of associations deployed in both popular and academic work on Amin, concerns gender and sexuality. Amin is portrayed as the epitome of masculinity, defined in terms of both violence (the warrior ethos) and a charismatic heterosexuality. Lady Listowel describes meeting him for the first time, ‘I looked into the smiling face of a tall, muscular officer with shrewd eyes, who invited me to a cup of coffee. He was a hulking figure of a man and I was fascinated by his hands – beautiful, slim hands with long, tapering fingers.’<sup>21</sup> Amin was a famous sportsman in his army days (he was heavyweight boxing champion of Uganda in 1951-2). According to his commanding officer, Iain Grahame, his ‘physique was like that of a Grecian sculpture, and no matter to what form of athleticism he turned his hand, he excelled and he conquered.’<sup>22</sup> During a particularly exhausting route march:

‘One man was an example and inspiration to us all. As we finally passed the finishing post, Idi Amin was marching beside me at the head of the column, head held high and still singing (...) for all he was worth. Across one shoulder were two Bren guns and over the other was a crippled askari. It reminded me of a translation of another KAR marching song:

*It's the Sudi, my boy, it's the Sudi [ie Nubi]  
With his grim-set, ugly face:  
But he looks like a man and he fights like a man  
for he comes of a fighting race*<sup>23</sup>

Amin's former Minister for Health, Henry Kyemba, in his book *A State of Blood* characterised his rule as follows:

‘Besides his five wives, Amin has had countless other women, many of whom have borne him children. His sex life is truly extraordinary. He regards his sexual energy as a sign of his power and authority. He never tries to hide

20 Smith, *Ghosts of Kampala*, 34.

21 Listowel, *Amin*, 12.

22 Grahame, *Amin and Uganda. A personal memoir*, 34.

23 *Ibidem*, 39.

## Leopold

his lust. His eyes lock onto any beautiful woman. His reputation for sexual performance is so startling that women often deliberately make themselves available, and his love affairs have included women of all colours and many nations, from schoolgirls to mature women, from street girls to university lecturers.<sup>24</sup>

Masculinity, violence, sexuality – all linked to an atavistic racial primitivism, together with a frontier historical tradition, both exemplified in Amin's West Nile origins – perhaps surprisingly, these themes are pursued most obsessively, not in the popular books on Amin, but in the academic work of the renowned Tanzanian-born political scientist Ali Mazrui. Mazrui's writings about Amin as they developed over the 1970s and '80s are complex and sometimes contradictory – matching, in this respect, their subject. He invokes the British historian Terence Ranger's early arguments about the relationship between 'primary' and 'secondary' resistance movements in Africa, suggesting that:

'It is General Idi Amin rather than Dr Milton Obote who is the true successor to those early warriors in Bunyoro, Acholi, as well as West Nile, who reached for their spears to strike a blow, however weak, against European imperialism.'<sup>25</sup>

Mazrui developed a pan-African theory of 'the warrior', exemplified by Amin, whom he described as 'in an important sense, a reactivation of the ancestral assertiveness of warrior culture.'<sup>26</sup> As such, Amin simultaneously exemplified heterosexual masculinity:

'What should not be overlooked is the sexual dimension of the warrior culture (...) In societies otherwise vastly different from each other, one factor remains constant, it was a *man* who fought for society on the battlefield. Virtues like courage, endurance, even ruthlessness, were regarded as hard, masculine virtues. The statement "he is a real man" could mean either he is sexually virile, or he is tough and valiant (...) In some African societies, special sexual rites [sic] were accorded to warriors (...) Given the link between manliness and warfare there could also be an easy link between violence and sexuality.'<sup>27</sup>

24 Henry Kyemba, *A state of blood: the inside story of Idi Amin*, 163.

25 Ali A Mazrui, 'The resurrection of the warrior tradition in African political culture', *Journal of modern African studies* 13.1 (1975) 67-84 there 67.

26 Ali A Mazrui, 'The warrior tradition and the masculinity of war' in: *Ali A. Mazrui ed., The warrior tradition in modern Africa* (Leiden 1977) 69-81 there 77.

27 Mazrui, 'The Resurrection', 71-73.



The sexual, the military and the political are merged in this masculine paradigm:

‘When we relate charisma to the warrior tradition in Africa, there is one quality which demands particular attention. We call this quality political masculinity (....) The political masculinity of the General does not lie merely in his size, though he is impressively tall and broad. Nor does it lie merely in his insistence that he fears no-one but God. Yet these factors are part of the story, combined with the additional factor that an affirmation of fearlessness and an athletic build have indeed been part of the total picture of martial values within African political cultures.’<sup>28</sup>

While Mazrui’s papers on this theme usually include a token reminder that the warrior tradition is a cruel one, the overall tendency of his work in the 1970s was to celebrate both that tradition and its then exemplar, Idi Amin.

How does this ultra-masculine, violent, hyper-(hetero)sexuality help in explaining the image of Amin as an icon of evil? The anthropologist Jean La Fontaine has written that:

‘In most of the societies anthropologists have traditionally studied, inhuman evil is personified in the form of the witch. Whatever the local term that is translated “witch” by anthropologists, it refers to those who commit acts perceived as transgressing the fundamental moral axioms on which human nature, and hence social life, is based. The sins attributed to witches may vary somewhat in their detail and emphasis according to the culture in question, but they commonly concern sex, food and killing (....)’<sup>29</sup>

La Fontaine, originally an anthropologist of Uganda, wrote this in the context of a study of ‘satanic ritual child abuse’ in the United Kingdom, but the general point applies well to Amin’s image as hyper-sexualised murderous cannibal.

This kind of evil involves an *excess* well beyond normal ‘badness’ or anti-social behaviour, even of normal killing and murder. In the European philosophical tradition, this is akin to Emmanuel Kant’s notion of ‘radical evil’. Kant’s 1793 essay ‘Religion Within the Limits of Reason alone’ sought to recreate in secular form a version of the theological concept of original

28 Ali A. Mazrui, *Soldiers and kinsmen in Uganda. The making of a military ethnocracy* (London and Beverly Hills 1975) 149.

29 Jean La Fontaine, *Speak of the devil. Tales of satanic abuse in contemporary England* (Cambridge 1998) 14.

sin, an ‘insurmountable wickedness’, the ‘radical evil’ that inhabits the heart of man and which he can ‘by no means wipe out.’<sup>30</sup> Kant no sooner proposed this than he dropped the idea but, in the mid-1990s, the concept was adopted by a group of neo-Lacanian psychoanalytic theorists, in an attempt to develop the ideas in Lacan’s 1959-60 seminar series on the ethics of psychoanalysis and his essay ‘Kant With Sade’. In these, reading Kant in the light of de Sade’s perversions of human reason, Lacan developed Freud’s concept of the death instinct into an analysis of a kind of pleasure in evil.<sup>31</sup>

The concept of radical evil implies an excess beyond normal human badness, however bad that may be, to something which seems inhuman. It is a move beyond the simple dualism of good/bad, and one which animates the various inhuman, externalised incarnations of evil so familiar to anthropologists of a wide range of societies: monsters, witches and so on. The Freudian approach implies the awful suspicion that the source of radical evil may ultimately lie inside ‘Us’, ‘inhabit[ing] our hearts’ – or our Ids – rather than being attributable to an externalised ‘Them.’<sup>32</sup>

The best known of this group of neo-Lacnians is the eclectic Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who has returned to the subject of radical evil a number of times. For Žižek, Kant is right to stress that human evil (*qua* radical evil) is an *a priori*, rather than an empirical phenomenon. However, in shying away from what he called ‘diabolical evil’, that is, evil as a deliberate ethical choice, Kant, according to Žižek, is resisting the implications of the concept of radical evil, on which, by a complex dialectical process, depends



Poster of the movie *The Last King of Scotland* (2006). From: Fox, <http://www.fox.co.uk> (consulted on 29th of october 2010).

30 Joan Copjec, ‘Introduction’ in: Joan Copjec ed., *Radical Evil* (London and New York 1996) viii.

31 Ibidem.

32 Ibidem.

any possibility of the good.

What is most relevant, for present purposes, in Zizek's analysis, is his application of the concept of radical evil to political issues:

'From the standpoint of the precapitalist corporate society, capitalism is Evil, disruptive, it unsettles the delicate balance of the closed, precapitalist economy.... However, once capitalism achieves a new balance of its self-reproductive circuit and becomes its own mediating totality, ie, once it establishes itself as a system which "posits its own presuppositions", the site of evil is radically displaced: what now counts as "evil" are precisely the leftovers of the previous "Good"; islands of resistance, of precapitalism which disturb the untroubled circulation of Capital, the new form of Good.'<sup>33</sup>

Taking off from this analysis, it is possible to re-conceptualise Amin's relationship to his history and that of his fellow West Nilers, 'the best material for soldiery in Africa'. Amin, in such a view, represents the not inconsiderable dark side of the British colonial fantasy. Rather than exemplifying *Africa* as a heart of darkness, he represents Western society's own dirty little secret. As Achebe noted about Conrad's book, the real source of the European fear of Africa is not the latter's imaginary otherness but its real similarity, 'What thrilled you was the thought of their humanity – like yours... Ugly'.<sup>34</sup> In a similar vein, Jacqueline Rose has written, 'On what is the belief in the infantile nature of the Primitive founded if not on a moment of projection?'<sup>35</sup>

This also suggests that Amin's hyper-masculinity was itself a colonial masquerade, not just in the sense of a spectacular performance, but in precisely the same sense that Lacan describes femininity as a masquerade. As Ellie Ragland-Sullivan puts it 'Lacan... [is] proposing the masquerade as the very definition of "femininity" precisely because it is constructed with reference to a male sign.'<sup>36</sup> Both positions, the ultra-feminine and the hyper-masculine, presuppose their opposite. In Amin's case, this 'opposite' of his hyper-masculinity is the feminised position of the subaltern. For

33 Slavoj Zizek, *Tarrying with the negative: Kant, Hegel and the critique of ideology* (Durham NC, Duke University Press 1993) 99.

34 Chinua Achebe, 'An image of Africa. Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness' in: Robert Kimbrough ed., *Joseph Conrad. Heart of Darkness* (Norton Critical Edition) (New York 1988) 251-262 on page 254.

35 Rose, 'Introduction', 53.

36 Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, 'The sexual masquerade. A Lacanian theory of sexual difference' in: *Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Mark Bracher ed., Lacan and the Subject of Language* (New York and London 1991) 49.

## *Leopold*

him, the latter term applies very literally; as a long-time Non Commissioned Officer in the British Army he was very much the historical child of that army and the state it represented. His Oedipal struggles with this severe father were well represented (whatever its other flaws) in *The last king of Scotland*. Every account of Amin is infected with fantasy (including those of his fellow West Nilers I spoke with in the mid-1990s).<sup>37</sup> His role as an icon of evil is thus not reducible to historical 'fact', but to an historical Imaginary, behind which lies the crude realities of political power in colonial and post-colonial society.

37 See Mark Leopold, *Inside West Nile. Violence, history and representation on an African frontier* (Oxford 2005).