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A history of the heritage economy in Yoweri Museveni’s Uganda

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ABSTRACT
When the National Resistance Movement (NRM) came to power in 1986, its cadres overflowed with reformist zeal. They set out to transform Uganda’s public life, put an end to ethnic division, and promote local democracy. Today much of this reformist energy has dissipated, and undemocratic kingdoms largely define the cultural landscape. This essay attempts to explain how these things came to pass. It argues that the heritage economy offered NRM officials and other brokers an ensemble of bureaucratic techniques with which to naturalize and standardize cultures. Discomfited by the enduring salience of the occult among the people they governed, and alive to the new opportunities that the global heritage economy offered, the secular men of the NRM turned to managers who could superintend cultural life. In the field of medical practice NRM authorities delegated considerable authority to an organization called “Uganda N‘eddagala Lyayo” (Uganda and Its Medicines), which worked to transform the situational and occultist knowledge of healers into the standardized repertoire of traditional medicine. In politics, NRM authorities turned to kings as brokers of tradition and as spokesmen for their people. The commercial impulse to trademark cultures and identify heritage products went hand-in-hand with the creation of unrepresentative political hierarchies. The 2016 presidential election was a further occasion for the reinforcement of monocultural, undemocratic forms of local government.

Located on Uganda’s western border, Kasese District has in recent months emerged as a pivot around which the cultural politics of President Yoweri Museveni’s regime turn. In the 2016 election the party of the opposition – the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) – enjoyed a great victory in the district. FDC candidate Kesiya Besigye won 56.4% of the presidential vote and the party swept all of the available parliamentary seats. The opposition won a higher percentage of the presidential vote in Kasese than in any other constituency in Uganda, besides Soroti and Kampala. When President Museveni’s re-election was announced, a militia of angry young men carried out a series of attacks on government policemen. There were rumors that the Rwenzururu kingdom – headquartered in Kasese – was planning to secede from Uganda, forming a larger entity called the “Yiira Republic” that would span western Uganda and eastern Congo. In early April President
Museveni was obliged to travel to Kasese, where he proclaimed that “Uganda will not lose even a piece of her land to the creation of the so-called Yiira republic.”

The post-election unrest reached a crescendo in November, when a large number of Rwenzururu royal guards gathered at the king’s palace to protect him against arrest by government policemen. The Uganda army, convinced that the king was plotting secession, stormed the palace, killing at least 116 people. At the time of writing, Rwenzururu’s king has been remanded to a prison in Jinja and is awaiting trial for murder; hundreds of Rwenzururu supporters are under arrest; and the palace lies smoldering, in ruins.

The post-election violence in western Uganda has been structured by a cultural economy that disposes people to regard themselves as members of bounded, separable, and antagonistic communities. There has been a proliferation of kingdoms in recent years, each of them claiming to represent the interests of a discrete people, each of them naming a specific tract of territory as their patrimony. All of these kingdoms claim to be heirs of ancient civilizations. All of them are, at least potentially, corporations. They produce artifacts for sale to a growing international market for cultural tourism.

The largest and most successful of Uganda’s incorporated kingdoms is Buganda, which the Museveni government recognized as a “cultural institution” in 1993. Buganda’s leaders have set up a trust company – called “Buganda Investments and Commercial Undertakings” – which owns majority shares in a number of firms: a radio station; an investment house; a telecom company; and a travel agency, called the “Royal Travel and Heritage Bureau.” Other kingdoms have tried to follow corporate Buganda’s lead. The Obudhingiya bwa Bwamba, for instance, is the newest of the “cultural institutions” recognized by the Museveni government. It was inaugurated in Bundibugyo on 31 May 2014, when Major Martin Kamya Ayongi was installed as Bwamba’s leader. The kingdom’s website claims that its constituents have a “single cultural heritage,” demonstrated by their “artistic expressions,” their “performing and visual arts and handicrafts, indigenous knowledge, cultural beliefs, traditions and values, cultural sites, monuments and antiquities.” The website features a list of tourist attractions within the kingdom’s borders: a hot springs, crater lakes, waterfalls, and various “cultural sites and sacred places.”

The Bwamba kingdom and other royalist projects are trademarks, mechanisms for the patenting and sale of cultural artifacts. They are also constituencies. The boundaries of electoral districts coincide with the boundaries of kingdoms. Thus the Tooro kingdom consists of Kabarole, Kamwenge, Kyegegwa, and Kyenjojo constituencies; the kingdom of Bunyoro consists of Hoima, Buliisa, Masindi, Kiryandongo, and Kibaale constituencies; the Busoga kingdom encompasses Buyende, Kamuli, Jinja, and several other constituencies. Uganda’s politicians compete to earn the favor of the kings who arbitrate their people’s loyalties. In Bundibugyo constituency, where the Bwamba kingdom is located, voters euphoric over their kingdom’s new status rewarded Museveni with 85.6% of the presidential vote in the 2016 elections. In Kasese, by contrast, Museveni’s embrace of the Obudhingiya bwa Bwamba was greeted with indignation, for the Rwenzururu kingdom had hitherto claimed Bwamba has part of its own domain. In the latter months of 2014 – following the installation of Major Kamya as Bwamba’s king – hundreds of Rwenzururu supporters attacked police stations and army camps, protesting against the NRM government’s unwonted support for the Bwamba separatists. The violence following the 2016 election is a further chapter in a longer history of antagonism between Museveni’s government and Rwenzururu’s outraged patriots.
How is it that Uganda’s cultural landscape came to be dominated by kings, “cultural leaders” and other heritage brokers? When the National Resistance Movement (NRM) came to power in 1986 its cadres fairly overflowed with millenarian energy and reformist zeal. They set out to transform Uganda’s public life, purge superstition, put an end to ethnic division, and promote local democracy. All over the country chiefs were turned out of office and elected “resistance councils” took a pre-eminent role in local administration. Within five years, much of this reformist energy had subsided, and today, undemocratic polities like the Buganda kingdom, the Rwenzururu kingdom, and the Obudhingiya bwa Bwamba define the cultural landscape. This essay attempts to explain how these things came to pass. It argues that the heritage economy offered NRM officials and other brokers an ensemble of bureaucratic techniques with which to naturalize and standardize cultures. Discomfited by the enduring salience of occultist knowledge among the people they governed, and alive to the new opportunities that the global heritage economy offered, the secular men of the NRM turned to managers who could superintend cultural life. In the field of medical practice NRM authorities partially delegated the management of human welfare to an organization called Uganda N’eddagala Lyayo, (Uganda and Its Medicines), which worked to transform the situational and practical knowledge of healers into the standardized repertoire of traditional medicine. In politics, NRM authorities turned to kings as brokers of tradition and as spokesmen for their people. The commercial impulse to trademark cultures and identify heritage products went hand-in-hand with the creation of new and unequal forms of government. It was in the repertoire of the heritage industry that the Museveni state found a means of managing the problematics of culture in its hinterlands.

The NRM and the occult

The NRM came to power in 1986 after a long and violent guerilla war against the government of Milton Obote. The architects of the NRM saw themselves as disciplinarians, restoring a straight-backed order among people who had been corrupted by the temptations and corruptions of Obote’s government. The NRM’s leader, Yoweri Museveni, had in a former time converted to the East African Revival, a Christian evangelical movement that encouraged followers to disavow worldly affections. The young Museveni was deeply impressed with revivalists’ probity and discipline.8 In the 1980s Museveni found in the apparatus of the NRM a means by which to author other people’s salvation. NRM propaganda argued that the Obote government had promoted an enclave of “night clubs, neon lights, tourist hotels and shiny office blocks,” and had auctioned off the country’s wealth for the guilty enjoyments of consumer goods.9 “Today African coffee, cotton, gold, copper, oil or uranium are being exchanged for toys, wigs, perfumes, whiskey or Mercedes Benzes,” wrote Museveni. “The moral fabric of our society is all but destroyed.” Museveni planned to constitute a “Directorate of National Guidance,” charged with:

- promoting a general revival of moral values in society, in particular to fight the evils of corruption, tribalism, religious sectarianism, anti-social behavior such as overcharging, smuggling, hoarding, ostentatious living, parasitism and other evils of this nature.10

Once they were in positions of authority, NRM officials advanced Museveni’s war against moral and political corruption. In 1987 the Minister of Local Government established a strict set of regulations for video theaters and dance halls, arguing that they were “a
danger to public security, morals and convenience.” Film censorship was imposed, and bars were made to close by 10 pm every night.11 In 1991 government restricted access to video halls for people under 18 years of age. The halls were showing “sexy blue movies, bloody violence, murder, rape, organized robbery and scenes depicting armed conflict which have a disastrous effect,” argued the Minister of Information.12 Local government officers took things even further. In Kasese District, in Uganda’s remote western border, a county chief ordered that people found playing cards during the morning hours were to be arrested and imprisoned. Any boy or girl under 18 years old found idling in town during daylight hours was to be dragooned into public works projects. “Boys do wander about in towns drinking beer only and all girls have left their rural areas in Uganda to settle in towns for prostitution purposes,” the chief argued.13 The draconian rules were a means of imposing a public morality.

The NRM’s reformist agenda was felt with particular urgency in Uganda west. The region had long been poorly served by Uganda’s central government: when in 1986 NRM officials inventoried government assets in Bundibugyo, they found that none of the police had guns or uniforms. Of the 135 clerks in government employ, only seven were educationally qualified for their jobs. Most were marginally literate. There was no Supervisor of Works, and neither was there a Road Inspector.14 The district had only 135 trained teachers and two secondary schools for a total population of 112,000 people. Most of the teachers had worked for months without receiving a salary.15 There were only two government buildings in the whole of the district; there was no post office and no electrical grid. The only doctor in the whole of the district left his post in 1985, and for two years he was not replaced.16 The district – at the end of a long and winding road from Fort Portal – was often cut off from the rest of the country during the rains, for the flowing water turned the road into an impassable gully.17

NRM cadres thought of themselves as harbingers of a new epoch. One of the movement’s supporters thought the “Uganda Revolution” was “politically and morally the most significant event that has happened in Africa since the Ghana victory.…. Ghana was the first phase, and Uganda the second in the long march to genuinely free Africa.”18 Local authorities in western Uganda were likewise certain about their historical role. Reading through their correspondence in the newly catalogued archives of district government, it is difficult not to be impressed with their industry and initiative. The Resistance Council in Kasese District described the paradigmatic government official as:

the model of the new man. He is the paragon of talent and good manners, he is the messenger of the new civilization and the propagandist of the Era of the Wananchi. He is the individual who has moved beyond the classical solution to human problems. … He has discovered the corruption of the political, economic and social structures throughout the world. He will thus succeed in attracting all those who are thirsty for a new existence in a new world ruled by liberty, justice and progress.19

Here was the charter for a new mode of public administration, freed of the corruptions of the past. The paradigmatic official, said the Kasese charter, was to be “free to think and act, he must have great strength of soul and character, he must be exemplary in his talent, his zeal, in performance of his duties, in his behavior.”

Onyango Odongo was one of the high-minded cadres called to government service in these heady days. He was an accomplished man. Trained as an accountant, he had served
as Secretary to the Opposition in Uganda’s Parliament during the mid-1960s. In 1976 he had co-authored an important book about the history of the Lwo-speaking people, basing his analysis on the extensive body of oral histories he had collected in southern Sudan and eastern Uganda. Odongo actively edited out references to magical or metaphysical events, insisting on a thoroughly secular narrative. His book, he proclaimed, “contained no fantasy like the story of the imaginary woman who could change herself into an elephant at night and then revert to a human being by day.”20 The NRM government appointed Onyango Odongo as District Administrator in Bundibugyo shortly after it came to power. In the first report he authored from his new post he described western Uganda’s postcolonial history as a fall from a state of grace. “The Garden of Eden has been criminally neglected by the willfully myopic and hopefully ignorant Ugandan politicians,” he wrote.21 Under the Obote government corrupt officials had squandered public funds, particularly for the purchase of “imported perfumes for their pampered women.” Bundibugyo had been the “worst victim of the Politics of Eating”: the district’s peasant farmers had doggedly produced coffee and tea with their hoes, but the “heartless [government] rulers in Kampala would come to them at the right time every year, buy off their harvest at absurdly low prices, carry the crops away to world markets and exchange them for cash … and then begin to squander with impunity.”22 Odongo urgently wanted a “well organized scientific research project” to “ascertain the economic potencies of every area in Uganda”; he asked also for a program of road-building, and for funds to support a new cooperative of coffee farmers.

For Onyango Odongo as for other men of the NRM, ethnic heritage had a strictly limited role to play in the radical work of political and economic reform. NRM authorities thought that self-interested British rulers had imposed chiefs on Ugandans as part of their “long established … policy of divide and rule.” Because tribalism had thwarted citizenly sentiment, most Ugandans, wrote an NRM lawyer, “had not adequately become politically mature” at the time of national independence.23 The movement’s code of conduct prohibited cadres from engaging in “tribalism or any form of sectarianism. We must be very stern on this point.”24 When in 1990 the Directorate of Cultural Affairs launched a literary competition, it defined a strictly limited role for research or writing about history. The competition’s purpose was to “further enlighten Ugandans on the ongoing Revolution in our country.”25 There was to be no mention of ancestral tradition. Authors were invited to compose their writing around forward-looking themes, such as “The Political Programme of the NRM: Four Years of Action,” and “Forward We Go, Backward Never.” The aim, wrote the competition’s organizers, was to “have Uganda’s history-in-the-making on permanent record for tomorrow’s generations.” By 1992 the past had been entirely absented from national celebrations of culture, and the organizer of the Uganda Cultural Festival could promise to emphasize “DEVELOPMENT, i.e. new ideas—innovations and inventions in all sections so as to enhance national development.”26

The NRM government of the late 1980s and early 1990s regarded Uganda’s conflicted history as a hindrance to progress, and they sought to direct citizens’ attention toward a bright and promising future, not toward the benighted past. Government authorities were therefore discomfited when Uganda’s people did not, all at once, embrace the new era they announced. In remote Bundibugyo District, Onyango Odongo was surprised to find that the local Amba people feared witches and sorcerers. He lamented that:
they can recite what they have learned from our cadres with amazing accuracy and clarity, but the fairly sound knowledge they received from the modern political education has not succeeded to liberate even highly educated men and women from the grip of primitive belief in the power of charms.27

Amba people did indeed possess a fearsome reputation: in an earlier time a British ethno-grapher had argued that “one cannot progress very far in the understanding of the [Amba] … without at least a rudimentary knowledge of their system of witchcraft.”28 For Odongo, Amba people’s metaphysical commitments were a delusion. He complained that local government authorities habitually refused to arrest smugglers, for they feared to be killed by witchcraft. “This primitive belief is holding the entire [population of] natives here the captive of baseless fears,” Odongo observed.

The men of the NRM thought occult knowledge was out of place in the new era that they sought to advance. But there are reasons to think that the field of work for Amba sorcerers and other therapeutic workers was actually expanding at the time the NRM government came to power. The infrastructure for public health in Uganda – formerly among the best in Africa – had entered an extended state of crisis during the 1970s and early 1980s, as qualified medical staff fled the country, infrastructure crumbled, and supplies of modern pharmaceuticals dried up.29 In 1979, the last year of Idi Amin’s government, the real purchasing power of the health budget was 6% of what it had been in 1969.30 Five hospitals had been destroyed during the war that toppled the Amin government. Ugandans responded to the crisis by seeking out alternatives to modern medicine, and by the early 1980s, “traditional” healers had achieved a new prominence in public life. In Bukedi, in Uganda’s east, the anthropologist Susan Reynolds Whyte found that medical practice was increasingly individualized, as sufferers diagnosed themselves and devised their own, eclectic therapies.31 In Buganda, the ex-politician Erisa Kironde described how his grandmother – a traditional healer – saw her practice expand dramatically, as people disgusted at the corruption in the medical infrastructure sought alternative paths to wellness.32 Many people planted kitchen herb gardens, and both forest and bush were combed to provide medicines for first aid.33 In 1987 officials in Kabale, in Uganda’s southernmost district, compiled a list of 23 herbalists and traditional doctors who practiced in the town’s precincts. They claimed to be able to heal “so many diseases,” including lunacy, bone fractures, worms, and a number of diseases that they named with vernacular-language terms: oruhima, eshashe, ebiyaga (epilepsy), ekinyu (yaws) and others.34 The malady called “slim disease” reached epidemic levels in Uganda by the mid-1980s, and it seems that traditional medical practitioners reworked their therapies to respond to the challenge that AIDS represented. In 1988 an NRM official in Bundibugyo reported that illegal medical practices were proliferating in his area. Many of these illegal practitioners were said to be using syringes to administer herbal remedies for AIDS.35

The secular men of the NRM gave little credence in this field of medical work. They actively sought to suppress the religious and cultural architecture of human wellness. When in 1989 the residents of one village in Bundibugyo collected funds with which to conduct a ritual called abarimu, which was meant to allay conflict and encourage sociable relations between people, the local authorities of the NRM banned the ceremony. They thought it to be a distraction from the real work of development. “It brings poverty and famine to villages, due to the large number of attendants,” one official noted.36 Such “backward traditional functions [should] be discouraged … [so that a] bright future in
development will be realized,” argued another official. This discomfiture with metaphysics was widely shared among NRM cadres. Convinced that they were heralds of a new political order, the enlightened men of the NRM struggled to manage and control the vibrant presences of the occult. The Resistance Council chairman of Karugutu was full of anxiety when, in 1988, a witchdoctor named Angali appeared in his parish and set to work administering ordeals to local men suspected of wizardry and cannibalism. Angali gave the men a concoction of herbs called “ambasa” in order to test whether the suspects had violated other people. The local official wrote to his superior in Bundibugyo to ask for advice. “I don’t know whether it’s true,” he commented, and worried that some of his people would be killed by the witchdoctor’s potions. The local chief shared these worries. “Since this drug is not chemically tested in any recognized Government Lab, I have a fear that it can be of great harm to the life of a human being,” he wrote. NRM authorities were mystified by the aggressive nature of Amba cultural practice. When the wife of a man named Ndyambo died in 1988, her parents and husband accused 10 local men of laying a spell upon her. The chair of the local Resistance Council had to rescue the 10 men from the torturous ordeal that had been planned for them, spiriting them away to a local government prison for protection. In a worried letter to the Bundibugyo District Administrator, he called local people’s diagnostic practices “unhuman.”

The NRM came to power at a particular conjuncture. The decaying infrastructure of formal medicine in the early 1980s led many Ugandans to seek out alternative remedies. The AIDS epidemic, which took its footing at this time, doubtless lent urgency to these endeavors. The secular men of the NRM were uneasy about the practice of popular medicine: they thought magic, sorcery, and metaphysics to be dangerous distractions from the real, material problems that the country faced. That is why, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Yoweri Museveni’s revolutionary regime invested in the business of heritage management.

**Traditional medicine and heritage management**

The mechanisms of the heritage industry gave insecure and befuddled NRM authorities instruments with which to naturalize, standardize, and manage the disruptive powers of occult knowledge. In neighboring Tanzania “traditional medicine” had been part of the medical school curriculum since the mid-1970s, and Tanzanian researchers had for decades been cataloguing, testing, and marketing herbal remedies for common diseases. With their eye on their neighbor, an NRM commission chaired by Dr Raphael Owor – the Dean of Makerere University’s Faculty of Medicine – recommended that government should work closely with traditional healers, incorporating them into local government health committees and granting them land on which to crop medicinal plants. The healers they had interviewed had assured the commissioners that the “evoking of gods or spirits in the treatment of patients” was “only a diagnostic procedure, just as X Rays are used in modern medicine.” And, the commissioners were told, the strange rites of spirit possession that accompanied many healing repertoires were nothing more than a recruiting device, a “calling from the spirits of ancestors,” often misrecognized as insanity.

In July 1988 – following the Owor Commission’s recommendations – the government’s Ministry of Health agreed to recognize an organization called “Uganda N’eddagala Lyayo” (Uganda and its Medicines) as the sole association for traditional healers in the whole of
the country. The organization had a membership of 25,000 healers. Its leaders claimed that 70% of Ugandans relied on traditional healers when seeking a cure for their diseases. In a circular letter the government’s Director of Medical Services laid out the (gendered) division of labor: traditional healers were to superintend childbirth and treat uncomplicated diseases, but if the healer “finds a problem in a certain patient let that case be referred to a hospital.” He and other government authorities hoped that Uganda N’eddagala Lyayo would “[promote and preserve] our traditional medicine as well as [uplift] the standards of traditional healers.” The authorities also hoped that that the association would “protect traditional healers from involving themselves in killing people through spiritual powers and dangerous herbs.” By 1991 the NRM’s Minister of Culture and Tourism was encouraging government culture officers in Uganda’s rural areas to conduct “serious research in traditional medicines in view of identifying herbs that can be used for curing diseases.”

Healers resident in each district were to be registered, and the herbs they used were to be “identified and recorded together with their botanical names.” “Witchcraft practices must be discouraged completely,” the Minister wrote, “and those who practice them must be reported to local authorities.” NRM authorities aimed to make traditional medicine into an auxiliary to biomedicine, folding Amba and other troublesome healers into the medical bureaucracy. By this means they sought to naturalize the metaphysics of the occult.

Traditional healers were avid and active participants in the bureaucratic regulation of their craft. After the Ministry of Health announced its endorsement of traditional medicine a meeting of herbalists in Kisoro, in Uganda’s south, was said to be “overwhelmed with honor at what they looked at as being the Birth Day of traditional healing in the modern world,” and “clapping of hands, whispers and loud smiles accompanied the atmosphere.” The “long despised traditional healers have a chance to come and be exposed to the rest of the public, unlike past regimes where the national knowledge was not encouraged in the modern society,” exulted the county chief. In their founding documents the architects of Uganda N’eddagala Lyayo set as their aim the creation of “disease free citizens.” The organization’s vocation was to bring divergent and idiosyncratic medical practices under central supervision. They planned to:

- plant, grow, collect, process, refine, research, prescribe and administer indigenous herbs or medicines. We examine both traditionally and medically to diagnose patients’ diseases, problems and misfortunes. We are training our members to use advanced methods and techniques of treatment and healing, through meetings, seminars, visits, and full time courses organized within the country and, at times, abroad.

Here was a means by which the upsetting powers of witchcraft and sorcery could be made subject to regulation. The association’s leaders appointed “health inspectors” in each district, charging them to ensure that healers worked hygienically. There was also a “Religion and Traditional Affairs Secretary,” who was responsible for “narrowing or eliminating the differences” between the association and the Christian churches. He was to conceive and implement research projects on subjects about which Uganda N’eddagala Lyayo and Christian churches had “sharp differences in principle.” The association’s leaders promised to “stamp out and strongly discourage unscrupulous physicians employing activities mistakenly copied or imported from foreign countries for the mere sake of getting money.” They also promised to ensure that a “traditional doctor is not to kill or give
moral support to witchdoctors or thieves.”48 In return for their supervisory work Uganda N’eddagala Lyayo’s authorities asked government for access to administrative infrastructures: for buildings to display and sell medicinal herbs; for motorcycles and bicycles with which to undertake their supervisory work; and for seats on local government councils.

Uganda N’eddagala Lyayo’s bureaucrats were taking herbs and other botanical objects out of their occultist and metaphysical contexts and placing them in the pharmacy. Their work helped to constitute traditional medicine as a creditable analogue to western biomedicine. As a leading healer in Kigezi District put it in December 1988,

The indigenous medicines are the only ones that can even cure indigenous diseases better than the imported medicines and drugs because our bodies here differ to those from where the medicines are manufactured, since they are manufactured to cure diseases in the areas where they are made.49

Here was a medicinal repertoire that helped to produce and sustain cultural difference. Here herbs, barks, powders, and other substances – hitherto made meaningful within a repertoire of patterned actions – were abstracted and made instead into a pharmacy uniquely suited to the condition of Ugandan (and African) people. Here the materials with which healers had formerly worked were redefined, not as instruments of occult practice but as drugs, acting biologically to cure Ugandans’ illnesses. Here traditional medicine was made into the distinctive property of the Ugandan body politic.

At the same time that Uganda N’eddagala Lyayo worked to standardize a pharmaceutical repertoire, it also sought to establish traditional medicine as culture, part of an assemblage of artifacts that could represent Uganda’s way of life to people outside Uganda. Like other heritage organizations, Uganda N’eddagala Lyayo was involved in producing the local for export.50 The association made explicit connections between the work of pharmaceutical standardization and the marketing of African heritage. In its constitution the association committed itself to “preserve [Uganda’s] own cultures and traditions which are the prestige and foundation of this part of Africa as a nation.”51 “We are fully convinced,” wrote the organizers, that “if traditions, cultures, and medicines are properly organized, they would not only advertise Uganda abroad but would also be a big earner for foreign currency.” In their constitution they promised to investigate “diverse ways of preserving the nation’s cultural heritage” by “encouraging black smithery, bark cloth making, tribal drama and music, and hunting craftsmanships.”52 In this way botanical objects were to take their place alongside locally made cloth, musical instruments, and other objects in the catalogue of the heritage industry.

The heritage industry presented the authorities of the NRM with an ensemble of techniques – the catalogue, the ethnographic book, the pharmacy, the display case – with which to manage the problematics of culture in Uganda’s benighted hinterlands. In 1987 the NRM posted its first “Culture Officer” to Kasese and Bundibuygo Districts in western Uganda. His name was Francis Barigye. He was a Christian, born and raised in Kigezi, in southern Uganda. He was convinced, he told a public gathering, that “Satan has never cured nor treated, but only kills.”53 Shortly after his arrival in Kasese Barigye assembled a large group of therapists and told them that “those who came as colonists did abuse us calling us witch crafts. But we are African doctors. We are doing the same job as the Bajungu [whites] are doing.”54 In the dawning days of the NRM’s government, local authorities were redefining the therapies that western Uganda’s people had hitherto
practiced: not as witchcraft but as traditional medicine, an enterprise that could creditably be pursued alongside biomedicine. Barigye appealed to Christian leaders to “carefully study the role of herbalists in society instead of dismissing them wholesale as devilish.”

In the same breath, he urged healers to be “scientific in the approach of their work and not continue carry on like their ancestors.” Healers were to be hygienic, cooperate with the Ministry of Health, and ensure that their patients were vaccinated against killer diseases. The heterogeneous processes by which they healed were edited, trimmed, and standardized. Francis Barigye had heard that “there are some doctors who have different herbs that can even drive away women and kill husbands.” “We don’t want bad herbs,” he declared. “Those should be driven away.” Herbs that were known to be beneficial were to be registered: Barigye kept a book in his office that listed all the medicinal herbs in the region, together with the diseases that they cured.

Francis Barigye’s record book allows us to see the infrastructure of heritage work in its most elemental form. On its pages the leaves, barks, and saps with which Amba healers worked were stripped of their metonymic and metaphysical aspects, detached from the ritual contexts in which they worked, and made to stand in a one-to-one relationship with certain diseases. They were also depersonalized, severed from the specific knowledge that individual healers had about the capacities of persons and the formation of communities. All of this was done in the name of heritage, for “old people are dying,” argued Barigye, and it was urgently necessary that their therapies would be recorded. With Barigye’s index in hand it was easy for medical professionals to see herbs as drugs, working to cure the corporeal body. “Modern medicine [should] intermarry with the old medicine to cure other diseases which attack people,” said an official in a meeting with the “Native Doctors” of Kasese District. Traditional medicine was conceived as an expansion of the pharmaceutical repertoire. There was a sense of discovery, of uncovering hitherto untapped potential, about the work of medicinal research. A 1994 pamphlet advertising the “Rwenzori Medical Herbs” association described how a friend of the proprietor had once suffered from an incurable bout of diarrhea. He had chewed the hardened gum from a tree, and was immediately cured. The story came as an epiphany to the proprietor of “Rwenzori Medical Herbs”: it “opened the gates for me to gaze at some people who have been healed in this way,” making him realize that:

there is something we are neglecting, something we are losing than mere burying and mourning over our deceased brothers and sisters, and this is carrying out research on the local medicinal herbs.

He and his colleagues conducted tests on herbs that healers submitted to them for examination, aiming to “eliminate the idea of individuals personalizing and keeping herbs a secret in order to help the entire community.”

The record book that Francis Barigye kept was a guide to the pharmacy of traditional medicine. It was also an entry in the library of heritage. In their effort to concretize and standardize healers’ repertoire, Barigye and his interlocutors were generating cultural capital, articles that could marketed for a profit to an international audience. For Francis Barigye and other heritage entrepreneurs in western Uganda, tourists were both the financial motor and also the first audience for the products of heritage. Barigye told an audience of “Native Doctors” that “When tourists come, in their mind they ask, ‘What is Uganda?’ The first answer they get, as they disboard the plane ladders, they
see culture dances, who perform free.” Barigye thought it imperative that Uganda’s culture should make a better impression. On the same occasion at which he compared African healers to western medical doctors, Barigye urged his audience to make “our African articles, like bags, pots, baskets, emighusu etc. which we can sell to other people abroad. That is our culture.”

For Barigye, traditional medicine was one element in a saleable assemblage of crafts, rituals, and repertoires that together constituted heritage. Rendered in this way, traditional medicine could take a place alongside dance, cuisine, dress, and language as part of the panoply of custom and tradition in contemporary Uganda. In 1991, five years after the NRM took power, government authorities organized the inaugural “Uganda National Cultural Festival” in Kampala’s largest stadium. It was the “first of its kind in Uganda,” trumpeted an NRM official, “bringing together all areas of cultural concern, including visual arts and crafts, traditional foods and drinks, literary works, traditional medicine, traditional games and performing arts.”

There was no place for witchcraft in the NRM’s theater of culture. Assembled on the stadium grounds, healers took their place alongside artists, authors, cooks, and dancers and other performers in the routinized work of heritage production. The cultural show was a theater of display, where the alienable artifacts of culture – bottles of herbs, drums, baskets, and other gear – could be marketed and sold. On the grounds of heritage, objects, rituals, and performances with disparate genealogies and complicated itineraries could be consolidated in a single arena, managed, organized, and aligned.

Royalism and discrimination

In the domain of politics – as in the domain of medicine – the NRM government has effectively sublet its authority to managers who can control, monopolize, and sell heritage products. From the beginning, all of this was profoundly undemocratic. Parliament adopted the Restoration of Traditional Rulers Act in 1993. Under the act, the kingdoms of colonial Uganda – abolished in 1967, during the era of nation-building – were resuscitated as “cultural institutions.” According to the 1993 act, the cultural leader’s role is to “promote and preserve the cultural values, norms, and practices which enhance the dignity and well being” of his people. Several kingdoms – first Buganda, then Toro, Busoga, and Bunyoro, then Rwenzururu, Rwamba, and others – have been recognized under the act. Their architects have been avidly involved in the rebuilding of traditional cultures. A 1947 book on the kings of Bunyoro and a 1955 book on the kings of Ankole were recently republished, and in the past few years new books have appeared on the customary law of the Toro kingdom, on “The Bakonzo/Banande and Their Culture,” on the “History and Culture” of the kingdom of Ankole, and on “The People and the Rulers” of the kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara. Uganda’s kingdoms have been using the Internet to expand the audience for their heritage lessons. The Bunyoro kingdom’s website, for example, welcomes viewers with a photograph of the king, resplendent in a gilt-encrusted robe. It invites readers to “Get an insight into the Kingdom’s inspiring history, its rich culture, development projects and what the King … and the Royal family are up to lately.”

Uganda’s kings have been made the arbiters of custom and the managers of tradition. In the contemporary economy of royalism there is little space for cultural pluralism or dissenting politics. Cultural and behavioral norms have been territorialized, and within their
borders Uganda’s kings can dictate about a wide range of affairs. The Rwenzururu kingdom – constituted in law by Uganda’s government in 2009 – began life in the 1960s, in a guerilla war fought by Konzo-speaking people against the Ugandan state. By the early 1980s Rwenzururu’s king, Charles Wesley Mumbere, was negotiating with the Ugandan government for the cessation of the war. He used the occasion to demand that the names of the streets in Kasese town should be changed to honor Rwenzururu, that government officers should use the Konzo language exclusively in their communication, that the Kasese city council should resign, and that Rwenzururu partisans should be appointed in their place. He also insisted that the local courts should be barred from pursuing litigation involving Rwenzururu partisans. Some of Kasese’s politicians objected when the king named three of his subordinates to serve as the district’s representatives in the Uganda Parliament. Rwenzururu’s partisans were indignant about the critics’ refusal to bend the knee to the royal writ. “They say they will elect their genuine members of parliament, and not those representing the view of the king,” wrote an outraged Rwenzururu memoirist. Rwenzururu’s leaders thought the will of the people to be of little consequence: they demanded that the critics be removed from their government posts, to be replaced by people loyal to the king.

There is much that has to be suppressed in order to make Rwenzururu’s centralized view of the region’s politics credible. Uganda’s kings can say nothing about the cultural and linguistic minorities who reside within the boundaries of their ostensibly homogeneous homelands. Minorities have experienced the NRM’s cultural gerrymandering as a form of oppression. When in 1989 the prospect of a Rwenzururu kingdom was under discussion, minority activists vociferously argued that Basongora cattle-keepers had a history that predated the arrival of the mountain-dwelling farmers who are the core constituency for Rwenzururu. They claimed that:

We, the Besongora, have a traditional history and an origin through many centuries. We, the original and present occupants of the Busongora valley pasture land, are an independent ethnic community. … We were here from time immemorial.

The population of cattle-keepers had been despoiled by the calamitous events of the twentieth century, argued the petitioners, allowing aggressive mountaineers to relocate into the plains. In this way, argued Basongora activists, “we were accorded as sub-human squatters’ status in our places of birth.” Basongora activists argued that their interests ought to be protected against the cultural hegemony of the Rwenzururu kingdom. After the NRM government ignored these protests and formally recognized the Rwenzururu kingdom in 2009, Basongora activists organized their own kingdom, installing an elderly man named Ivan Rutakirwa Rwigi IV in a public ceremony on 1 July 2012. The Busongora kingdom – which is not recognized under Ugandan law – now vies for space, recognition, and resources with the Rwenzururu kingdom, the Obudungiya bwa Bwamba, and other proto-polities in western Uganda’s cultural landscape. Each of these polities claims to represent a particular people; each of them claims that its monarchy is rooted in ancient history. Each of them has its own flag, its own national anthem, and its own website. Each of them encompasses one or more electoral constituencies. And each of them regards its culture, its community, and (potentially) its future as separable from its competitors.

There are forms of cultural practice that are not conceived within the territorialized architecture of the heritage industry. Even as entrepreneurs built the pharmacy of
traditional medicine and marketed heritage products, other healers were engaging in heterodox experiments with bodily and social healing. In the early 1980s, in the wake of the medical and social crisis occasioned by Idi Amin’s misgovernment, a group of a dozen healers calling themselves the “Apostolic Church” began a therapeutic practice in Misole, high in the mountains above Kasese. Their chief correspondent, Barnaba Buluku, emphasized the novelty and flexibility of their healing practice. They were “using their mouths to spray air onto the patient, spraying water onto the patient, using sticks with the guidance of the Lord’s Holy Spirit to heal the patient in this hospital,” he told the District Commissioner. Their techniques could not be patented or trademarked. Neither did they make reference to ancestral tradition. The Misole healers made the disciplines of bodily comportment – chastity, probity, asceticism – into a source of healthy living. Baluku described how he and his colleagues “clean ourselves like the Muslims do. We wear white robes, when entering the House of the Lord we first remove our footwear, we do not completely shave our hair, we do not walk proudly, we do not eat meat roasted by another person.” Their practice was extraordinarily broad: Baluku claimed to be able to heal “madness, epilepsy, dysentery, gonorrhea, leprosy, polio, drunkenness, poisoning, malaria, evil spirits, [and] diarrhea” while also “spreading the word of Jesus Christ.” Importantly, no one at Misole claimed to have learned their business from their forefathers. This was not heritage work. They described their therapeutic powers as a gift of revelation, not an ancestral inheritance. “I was under a tree where I had spent some several days without eating and drinking,” one of them wrote. “The Lord spoke to me in thunderous voices, in these voices were the words ‘My child, I have called you in the midst of your brethren to serve me, so don’t walk in the arrangements of mankind’.”

There was no heritage in the Misole healers’ therapeutic practice, no ancestral tradition to chart, no longue durée to reconstruct. Neither was there a kingdom or a constituency that had to be defended. The Misole healers worked by aligning bodies and disciplines, creating a social environment, placing physical bodies in healthy situations. In their labors the Misole healers help us glimpse a space where the ancestral and the archaic have no purchase, where new possibilities can come into the horizon of cultural life.

Conclusion

The 1980s – when the NRM came to power – were a time when the international infrastructure of heritage management was undergoing renovation and expansion. In 1989 UNESCO issued its “Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore,” which called on governments worldwide to protect intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO thereafter organized a series of training courses to teach bureaucrats how to organize and preserve the cultural knowledge of indigenous groups. There was a growing global market for the products of heritage. In Uganda and elsewhere in eastern Africa cultural entrepreneurs sought to capitalize on these opportunities by inventorying, cataloguing, standardizing, and marketing cultural products. Uganda N’eddagala Lyayo was the first of these organizations: its architects codified the idiosyncratic practices of traditional healers, rendering their situational knowledge into an ensemble of pharmaceutical products that could be trademarked, marketed, and sold. Uganda’s kings have likewise been central to the managerial economy of heritage. In recent years UNESCO
has inscribed several Ugandan cultural practices on its “List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.” Among them are the “Empaako tradition of the Batooro, Banyoro, Batuku, Batagwenda and Banyabindi of western Uganda,” the “Koogere oral tradition of the Basongora, Banyabindi and Batooro peoples,” and the Bigwala musical tradition of eastern Uganda’s Soga people. All of these cultural practices are said to belong to a particular people. Many of them are closely associated with the archaic practices of royal courts. Rendered as heritage, Uganda’s musical and literary traditions are now part of an ensemble of commodities that can both finance and advertise monarchy. So it is that the Buganda kingdom recently opened a shop in a mall in the center of Kampala. The “Buganda Brand Shop” sells spears, drums, books, flags, recorded music, and other heritage commodities. It is operated by a firm called “Majestic Brands.”

The capitalization of the heritage industry – the inventorying of assets, the delegation of authority to kings, the marketing of ethno-commodities – has gone hand-in-hand with the development of profoundly unequal, undemocratic forms of government. The trademarking of cultures – as assets to be sold abroad – makes culture into the property of a particular people and invites brokers to define authentic cultural expression. There is no space here for a heritage of republicanism, for the marketing of democratic artifacts, for a celebration of the history of acephalous societies. In contemporary Uganda majesty is a brand, a sales technique. If it is to find a market, cultural heritage has to be centralized, brought under the control of an authority who can discriminate. Discrimination is both a means of distinguishing the real from the fake and a method of exclusion. It is a method of distinguishing the native from the imported, the original from the corrupted. In the economy of heritage, multi-culture is decadence.

That is why the 2016 election entailed violent efforts to draw boundaries around territories and peoples. The tight overlay between political constituencies and neo-traditional kingdoms has made elections into tendentious occasions for the definition and maintenance of monocultural institutions. That is why, in the years leading up to the 2016 elections, there was a proliferation of new kingdoms and proto-polities in western Uganda, each of them representing the ostensibly distinct interests of discrete ethnic groups. That is why, in Bwamba, voters energized by the NRM’s recognition of their king rewarded the ruling party one of the highest vote percentages in all of Uganda. That is why, in Rwenzururu, royalists outraged by the NRM-endorsed disassembly of their kingdom voted overwhelmingly for the opposition. And that is why, on a fateful day late in November 2016, a band of patriotic men, gathered in the palace of their king, may or may not have planned to take their people out of Uganda altogether.

Notes
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10. SOAS “Liberation” box 15: National Resistance Movement, “Toward a Free and Democratic Uganda” (Kampala, n.d. [but 1982]).
12. Kasese District Archives (hereafter KasDA) file with no cover: Minister of Information and Broadcasting to all District Administrators, 22 February 1991.
13. KasDA “Visits and Tours” file: Y. Mulima, county chief Bukonjo, to District Executive Secretary, 6 October 1987.
15. BDA box 503, “Education Policy and General Correspondence” file: Regional Education Officer to Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education, 12 March 1987.
16. BDA box 539, “Monthly Reports” file: District Administrator, Bundibugyo, to Permanent Secretary, Office of the President, 5 December 1986.
17. BDA box 519, “Roads and Transport” file: D.C. Bundibugyo to Administrative Secretary, Bundibugyo District Administration, 5 June 1985.
27. BDA Box 539, “Monthly Reports” file: District Administrator to Minister of State, Office of the President, 4 June 1987.
31. Whyte, “Medicines and Self-Help”; see also Whyte, “Penicillin, Battery Acid and Sacrifice.”
33. Obbo, “Healing,” 188.
34. KabDA Health box 5, “Traditional Healers” file: Senior Town Agent, Kabale, to District Culture Officer, 19 December 1987. Translations from Rukiga are derived from Taylor, *Simplified Runyankore-Rukiga-English Dictionary*, 18 and 44.
35. BDA box 529, “District Health” file: County chief Bwamba to subcounty chiefs, 1 December 1988.
39. BDA box 517, “Ntoroko” file: Agonga, County Chief, Ntoroko, to District Executive Secretary, 5 October 1988.
41. The configuration of traditional medicine in contemporary Tanzania is described in Langwick, Bodies, Politics, and African Healing, Chapter 3.
44. BDA Box 527, “Traditional Healers” file: Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, to all District Cultural Officers, 25 June 1991.
50. See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture, Chapter 3.
51. BDA “Associations” file: President, Uganda N’eddagala Lyayo, to District Administrator, Bundibugyo, n.d. (but July 1988).
60. KasDA “Traditional Medicine and Healers” file: Minutes of a meeting with the Native Doctors, Uganda N’eddagala Lyayo, 15 March 1989.
63. KasDA “Cultural and Information Services Management Committee” file: Francis Barigye to Treasurer, Kasese District Administration, 24 April 1991.
64. Karlström, “Imagining Democracy”; Englebert, “Born-again Buganda.”
65. Nyakatura, Abakama of Bunyoro-Kitara; Kamugungunu, Abagabe b’Ankole; Rubongoya, Naaho Nubo; Magezi, Nyakango, and Aganatia, The People of the Rwenzoris; Kirindi, History and Culture of the Kingdom of Ankole; Kihumuro-Apuli, A Thousand Years of Bunyoro-Kitara Kingdom.


68. KasDA “District Team and Planning Committee” file: Meeting of District Team and District Council, 18 August 1981.

69. KasDA “Rwenzururu Central Office” file: Baseka Erisa to Establishment Officer, Kasese, 8 March 1981.

70. Holsey, Routes of Remembrance.

71. KasDA file with no cover: Yosia Ngada, Tom Kawira and others to Chair, District Land Committee, 12 May 1989.


74. KasDA file with no cover: Christopher Besweri Kaswabuli to District Executive Secretary, 5 July 1990.


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