

Book Reviews

Uganda's Contemporary History Caricatured via Presidential Autobiography

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Y. K. Museveni, 1997, *Sowing the Mustard Seed: The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in Uganda*, London, Macmillan, Paper back, pp.xiv + 224,
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Historical biography is a branch of history that aids in historical reconstruction. In other words, biographies and autobiographies are vital sources of history, especially given that they reflect the author's perspectives, views and opinions on salient issues in given historical discourses.

It is, therefore, imperative that we study eminent African historians and important personalities who have made contributions towards historical knowledge. Their public and private lives and deeds deserve to be studied. This is urgent, given that very little research work has been undertaken in the realm of historical biography in Africa. It is simultaneously an incontestable fact that the role of individuals in influencing the different aspects of history is immense. Thus, several personalities the worldover have made indelible marks on the tempo and chronology of history at different times, thereby underscoring the individual's role in the historical process. However, autobiographies must be used with care. The author can glorify his or her role out of proportion; hence the possibility of bias, distortion and prejudice.

Sowing the Mustard Seed: The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in Uganda, therefore, falls within the foregoing remarks. The book is a story of President Museveni's life from birth to date as narrated by Museveni himself.

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The book consists of fourteen chapters, an appendix, a glossary and an index. It is both thrilling and action-packed.

The thrill is due to the incredibly active life the author has led since he was an innocent kid growing up in Ntungamo in Western Uganda. The book is both sociological and political.

Without nostalgia, Museveni recounts his early years among his nomadic Bahima sub-nationality of Nkore. The only son at the time, he is seen, at hardly five years old, weighed down by farm work such as carrying cattle dung in his bare hands, a chore he disliked, especially during the rainy season. As a typical Muhima boy, Museveni wore the 'skin of a premature calf' for clothing and resentfully smeared himself with foul-smelling ghee, supposedly to bring luck to the cattle he was tending at such a tender age. This hard life was eased, however, in the evenings as he used to listen to the fireside chat between his father — when he was not drunk — and his great-grand mother (chapter 1).

The story moves on to how he began school and made life-long friends such as Eriya Kategaya (now his first Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs), Martin Mwesiga, Mwesigwa Black and Valeriano Rwaheru. He narrates how he went through his secondary education; his political awakening; and his participation in community work in Nkore (chapter 2).

With two others in this group, Museveni enrolled at the University of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania in 1967, where he made a name as a radical student under the tutelage of leftist radical scholars such as the famous Guyanese historian, the late Walter Rodney. It was at Dar-es-Salaam that Museveni challenged President Julius Kambarage Nyerere on his *Ujamaa* policy and Nyerere came to know him, later a blessing for him. At University, according to Museveni he turned out to be an ambitious, single-minded youth scorning 'minor distractions' like drinking and dating girls as 'not good for a potential leader' (chapter 3).

Beginning in 1971, having graduated with a BA in political science in 1970, Museveni engaged himself in daring activities bordering on adventurism, all in the name of fighting what he calls 'unprincipled politics and politicians'. For instance, he made a snap decision to leave for Dar-es-Salaam to hold consultations and undercut former President Apollo Milton Obote's 'misrepresentation of issues at home' on the very day of Idi Amin's takeover of state power.

In chapters five to twelve, Museveni narrates how he fought the Amin military dictatorship, 1971-1979; his role in the brief Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF) governments of Yusuf Lule and Godfrey Binaisa,

1979-1980; how he fought the second Obote administration, 1981-1985; and how he fought and eventually grabbed state power from the Tito Okello military junta that had toppled the second Obote administration, 1985-1986.

Up to the beginning of 1986, Museveni portrays himself as an impatient and fearless man of steel, determination and action who was finding his level the hard way. At one point, we are told, he ate monkey meat, though reluctantly, but declined a bowl of snails, delicacies in eastern Congo (ex-Zaire). At another time, his boat drifted loose on Lake Victoria at the mercy of the waves. Another time, he was detained and tortured.

Museveni maintains that it was in this phase of his life that he lost all his fellow core strugglists, save for Kategaya. He seems to mourn them, although he is quick to mask the loss and his grief. In one incident, Museveni, with Martin Mwesiga and another comrade, were surrounded by a contingent of fifteen armed military police officers of Amin in a house in Maluku Housing Estate in the eastern town of Mbale. As the trio, posing as students, were being marched to their car, Museveni decided to hop over a hedge, 'praying' his friends would also scatter. The soldiers chased him as they fired, with the help of residents who thought he was a thief. He brandished his pistol and ran off to safety. However, his colleagues were fatally shot, but only after they had killed two soldiers.

It is such story-telling and hair-raising scenes that create the tension and suspense in much of the book; the kind that can keep one on the edge of one's seat. The author narrates the story in a simple, flowing narrative. The hallmark of this tale, however, lies in the author's ability to observe situations. Often, he was a participating observer, and made reflective comments.

Unfortunately, these commentaries are diluted by the author's perspective of fellow politicians, portraying himself as the quintessential politician: selfless and with all the 'right' ideas. Disdainfully and in explicit language, he describes Obote as 'narrow-minded and so tribally inclined,' while Lule was 'dictatorial' and Binaisa 'indecisive,' and Amin, a 'buffoon'. Other people's lines of thinking and doing things that do not tally with the author's own, are 'mediocre', 'backward', 'reactionary', 'primitive', 'sectarian', 'bankrupt', etc. The author portrays himself as always the 'initiator' of 'correct' ideas, line and the like.

Furthermore, it is equally pathetic that *Sowing the Mustard Seed* cannot be regarded as offering a fresh critical analysis to Ugandan studies because Museveni reduced his to a personal vendetta against his enemies. In many instances, the author turns and returns to his traditional punching bag, Obote,

accusing him of all sorts of 'crimes'. The author seems to nurse an irreconcilable hatred against Obote, so much so that to him everything Oboteish, is 'satanic'. He must have found it nauseating to occupy Obote's former room in State House in Entebbe.

By focusing on ridiculing and name calling (anyone who does not toe their line is either 'useless', 'nothing', 'swine' or 'frogs'), Museveni in this book does not portray a true nationalist. Museveni should not be evaluating his achievements by the errors of the past. If the author and his government have been such wonderful performers as he wants us to believe, their achievements would be speaking for themselves. However, this is to the contrary. The author is at the forefront of distorting Uganda's history throughout his book. For instance, he boasts of his government having 'ushered in peace', but an objective comparison with the Obote I administration of the 1960s shows that Uganda was more peaceful then (despite problems here and there), than the eleven years of the Museveni regime (1986-1997). It is also true that both the Obote II administration of the first half of the 1980s and the Museveni regime were characterised by bloody insurgencies. The only difference is that the Museveni period has witnessed the stage expanding to cover the north and west of Uganda, hitherto peaceful areas.

Obote's contribution to Uganda cannot just be glossed over or belittled like the author does. It is not true that Obote did nothing worth praising in Uganda's postcolonial history. The author himself knows that Obote did so much for Uganda. The sole fact that Obote led Uganda to independence should be acknowledged by the author in the scholarly tradition of objectivity and humility. The author boasts of economic success story under his government, which cannot be entirely ignored. But it is a fact that Uganda has never recorded as much prosperity as it did between 1962 and 1970, the time when Obote was behind the wheel. The 1966 crisis and the 'stealing' of elections in 1980 which the author discusses, and claims tainted Obote's governments, are two political manoeuvres which are not peculiar to Obote's governments alone.

It is, therefore, sheer political opportunism and demagoguery for the author to pretend not to see what some of his opponents have accomplished. Obote, his weaknesses and shortcomings notwithstanding, did something commendable. The author of *Sowing the Mustard Seed* should be a statesman and give Obote credit where it is due.

Indeed, Obote and Museveni must be regarded as the two most important historical characters of contemporary Uganda. Both, in their own ways, were seen at the time of their coming to power as 'radical nationalists'.

Unfortunately for Obote, his more recent intervention in Uganda's politics has blighted his more radical and nationalist past in the 1950s and early 1960s. For Museveni, even after wielding state power for eleven years, he still basks in the sunshine of his 1986 victory.

However, one of the fascinating and continuing aspects of both Obote and Museveni is that despite protestations to the contrary by both, their politics is broadly interpreted in 'tribal' terms. Obote never ceased talking about the fact that his government had people from the 'south' (especially Buganda) as well as from the 'north', whilst Museveni, up to today, is at pains to point out that he too has people from the 'north' in his government, and that it would be wrong to see his politics in 'tribal' terms. This becomes very clear from his book.

And yet Museveni too cannot hide the fact that just as Obote's army, Amin's army and Tito Okello's army were predominantly from the 'north', his own army which he perceives to be a 'national army' (pp. 174-176), is predominantly from the 'south'. During the guerrilla struggles that the author narrates, the fighters were told that 'the enemy' were the 'Nilotics' or the 'Anyanyas', which is a reference to the people from the north of Uganda and south of the Sudan. His (Museveni) ouster of the Okellos from power in January 1986 was celebrated by the 'southerners' as their victory (at last!) against the 'northerners'. It might have even been commendable if the author had dedicated his book to those who fought for him — his so-called liberators — rather than his wife, parents and children.

The author accuses Obote of detaining five of his (Obote's) own ministers, calling it dictatorial. But his (Museveni's) own 'southern front' did not remain united for long. Within eight months of coming to power, Museveni felt it 'necessary' to detain three of his ministers and a former Vice President who, although belonging to different parties, were all Baganda. Like Obote, Museveni too is facing what in crude politics is defined as 'the Buganda problem', although for Museveni, there is the added 'northern problem', which he tries to down play (pp. 176-180). In fact for Museveni, the problem, if indeed it is a 'problem', came to the surface faster than during Obote's first rule. It is true that Obote used the army to 'solve', 'the Buganda problem' in 1966, which resulted in the demise of the institution of monarchy in Buganda and other areas such as Nkore, Bunyoro, Toro and Busoga. But Museveni too has used the army to try to solve the 'northern problem'. He has also tried to woo the Baganda, Banyoro, Batoro and Basogo by restoring their Kingdoms (although these are really shadows of their former selves), for purposes of winning votes during the 1996 presidential elections.

Thus, although the author tries very hard to twist Uganda's post colonial history to suit his whims, he fails to answer the following questions that remain staring into his face: How does one explain the persistent ethnic turn of events in Uganda, and 'tribalist' interpretations of politics of the two most historical figures in Uganda whose self-image is 'radical' and 'nationalist'? Is there no escape from 'tribalism'? Is it so ingrained in Uganda's history and recent politics that it simply overwhelms all other forms of consciousness among the people, and the best efforts of their leaders to escape from it? Museveni tries, unconvincingly, to answer these important questions by using a hotchpotch of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist approach which virtually makes him a caricaturist.

In Uganda, whilst 'tribal' consciousness among the people is certainly a factor, it is rendered salient by 'bad politics' of the leadership. Religious and class consciousness are also significant. However, these get superseded at most times (though not always), by 'tribal' consciousness which is easily manipulated by the leaders for their own narrow political interests. These interests are defined by the essentially petty bourgeois leadership (even those professing to be 'radical' and 'nationalist') not in terms of mobilising the entire population of Uganda in their struggle against imperialism and neo-colonialism (despite the rhetoric), but in narrow terms of fighting one another to come to power and then to 'liquidate' those described as 'the enemy' by the use of military force. This necessarily has two parallel and contradictory consequences. The 'challenger' relies predominantly on his own 'ethnic' groups (for example, Acholi and Langi in the case of Obote, and Banyankore and Baganda in the case of Museveni), to fight 'the enemy', whilst forcing 'the enemy' in turn to fall back on his own 'ethnic' groups for security and support. The forces of 'tribalism' thus get mutually reinforced on both sides.

Thus, the logic of 'tribal politics', becomes curiously self-defeating, for within the 'tribal fronts', each party creates to buttress its power, there are further 'tribal' divisions which become salient at one time or another, whilst creating room for manipulation by the opposite forces. Thus, the divisions among the 'southerners', for example, among the Catholic Baganda and Protestant Baganda, allowed Obote to manipulate Buganda politics and stay in power over two periods. Similarly, in the 'northern front', the contradiction between the Acholi and the Langi created a fissure in 1984-1985, permitting 'cross-tribal alliance' between Museveni's National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) and the Acholi faction of Obote's 'front' to oust the Langi Obote out of power.

Those who try to interpret Uganda's politics (as Museveni does), in purely 'tribal' terms have an impossible task. They cannot, without being tautological or self-contradictory, explain the diametrically opposite phenomena of 'tribal fronts' and 'cross-tribal alliances' in terms of 'tribal loyalties', for these loyalties are not so sacrosanct after all. Why should religion at times become such a potent divisive factor as to supersede the purely 'tribal' factor. Why should the Acholi soldiers see themselves at times as 'allies' of the 'southerners' against their Luo brothers and sisters?

All we are saying is that petty bourgeois politics are vastly more enigmatic than tribalist interpreters make them out to be, that Museveni is no less or more 'tribal' or for that matter 'nationalist' than Obote, and that anything that divides the people is grist to the mills of petty bourgeois politics. Unity for the petty bourgeoisie is temporary, ephemeral and opportunistic. Division is what they really thrive on; it is the bread and butter of their politics. As for the 'left' among them, it is not Marx who is their teacher but Machiavelli, though some profess to borrow from both, depending on the 'ideological requirements' of the moment. The principal contradiction in the neo-colonies, such as Uganda, is between the people and imperialism, and not between one nationality against another. Tribalist analysis, however, is what one lapses into if one does not understand the ways of imperialism, and if one regards imperialism as something 'external' to Uganda. But the role of imperialism in postcolonial Uganda is too huge a subject to be discussed here.

It is in this regard that chapter thirteen, 'the Reconstruction of Uganda', and chapter fourteen, 'Building a Democratic Future', become a force. As regards women, the author takes pride in 'bringing women into the mainstream of the country's governance' (p.190). This claim must be treated with caution. The author realises that women constitute 'more than half of the country's population...' (pp. 190-191). As far as we are concerned, Museveni has misused women for his own narrow, selfish, and sectarian interests, to use some of his own favourite adjectives.

When the NRM government was constituted in 1986, women had cause to be optimistic. There was general talk of 'creating an enabling environment' for women to forge ahead, which was readily believed, especially as women (in greater numbers, although not for the first time, were soldiers in the UNLA), who were seen clad in army gear carrying guns, some of them with babies as well. It appeared that all obstacles to women's full involvement in national aspirations would be removed, especially as it was announced soon afterwards that women's representation was guaranteed at all levels of Resistance Council from the village level to the District level. So when

thirty-eight women entered the National Resistance Council (Parliament) in 1989, it was felt that things had started happening favourably for women.

The expectations rose even higher when the number of women delegates went to fifty-one in the Constituent Assembly elections of 1994 and to sixty in the 1996 parliamentary elections. The apex of it all is that the Vice-President of Uganda is a woman. The way forward for Ugandan women, therefore, promised expedited equality and equity of the genders in the 'strengthening of democracy'. But there is room for misgivings, although the author argues that 'By appointing a woman Vice-President we singled out women and whispered something to them to give them prominence and confidence' (p. 192). This kind of reasoning is simplistic and demeaning to women. Apart from having a woman Vice-President who is paraded everywhere as a showpiece of Uganda's 'advancement' in promoting women's involvement in 'nation-building', there is only one other woman member of a huge cabinet. Although a couple of women hold ambassadorial positions in ministerial and other senior administrative positions, the 'Glass Ceiling' for women is still extremely low; even for those who appear to have made it, educationally. And for the majority of the women who are still wallowing in chores close to the hearth and nature, their various masters still keep the chains and crack the whips on them day by day to ensure that they remain reticent and carry on with their chores as in the stone age days. Despite the author's claim, therefore, that he has contributed toward the 'liberation' and 'involvement' of women in national affairs, the vast majority of women especially in the rural areas remain in the lower echelons of subjugation and near total exclusion from the centre of developmental activities.

What the author calls 'Looking Ahead' (pp. 214-215), is a sad and worrying affair for the people of Uganda. As usual, the author is 'optimistic about Uganda's future'. He even claims, 'There are now people of presidential calibre and capacity who can take over when I retire...'. Of course, he does not say when he envisages such retirement to come; which means he is there to stay in power for a long time. But the question of there being people of 'presidential calibre' cannot simply be decided by one person. It is the people themselves, in a democratic manner, to decide and determine such a question. Certainly, the kind of people the author has in mind for the presidency after his 'retirement', are his sycophants who will ensure his interests even after his 'retirement'. This, the people of Uganda cannot allow, because it negates the very tenets of democracy.

We cannot forget to mention that the author's practice of boasting that he defeated past dictators is most disgusting. It is very clear that the author has

instituted his own dictatorship under the so-called 'no party' democracy which is really a return to the moribund one party dictatorship of the past. I disagree that in the present Uganda polity there is an atmosphere of 'democratic rule', and, therefore, claiming it to be his personal achievement is quite untrue. The sad consequence of this is that it creates a false impression to observers who may equate it with creating sound institutions of democratic governance. And the saddest part of it, is that such a system collapses with the collapse of such a personality. The Rwanda and Zaire cases are very vivid. We, therefore, need to be very cautious about the nature of transition in Uganda that seems to be built on the indispensability of the cult of Museveni, especially given that only the 'Movement' is alone on the stage and political parties are banned by the new constitution, which in a large measure, reflects Museveni's own wishes and interests. In fact, it was not necessary, in the first place, to write a new constitution. The old constitution has room for amendments. But Museveni wasted plenty of resources, which actually went to bribe some Ugandans, to write a new constitution to legitimise his own dictatorship.

The evidence of his dictatorship is staring Ugandans right in their faces. Museveni spent ten years and four months as president of Uganda without any political contestation, thereby holding unchallenged power. He has effectively dominated the army (in fact, his own army), as Commander-in-Chief, Minister of Defence, and Chairman of the High Command. He has equally dominated the political scene as the unquestionable Chairman of the NRM and as President. His dominating influence has always endeared him with the army where he is idolised as 'Mzee', while among the ordinary citizens especially in the West, his home region, he has created a psychological orientation of indispensability.

Museveni's idolisation by the army and adoration by the ordinary folk in the west and in some parts of Buganda, has had significant impact on his personal beliefs and on those of a section of the electorate. Judging by his conduct of his campaign in the May 1996 presidential elections, he was unable to hide his reliance on the army (something he constantly blames Obote for). During his campaign in Kiboga District he boasted that at fifty two years, he was still strong enough to cause trouble for the next twenty years. The methods Museveni used to secure his 'Victory' were most undemocratic. His campaign team used the press to psychologically intimidate the voters by designing advertisements which showed that without him (Museveni), insecurity would return to Uganda and he himself announced publicly that he could not handover power to the 'idiots' (opponents) whom he had defeated with a bullet but who were staging a comeback through the ballot. This is our 'democrat'.

All in all, the book is too fast-paced; so much so that by its end, a keen reader is left unconvinced that all that should have been said, has been said. We have already pointed out some of the gaps. But we add a few more.

There is too much of Museveni, the 'smart' politician and 'brilliant' commander of the bush war days, but very little of Museveni the man. We do not see the family man. Neither do we see a man with interests outside of politics. How did Museveni perform academically at the University of Dar-es-Salaam? This question is important because it seems the man had very little time for books.

It seems the author was too much in a hurry to justify the many years during which he used arms to capture state power and rule as a soldier. But in doing so, the author gives the impression that he played the most important role among other Ugandan fighting groups when, for instance, it came to dislodging Amin from power. However, reading chapters five, six, seven and eight, one does not see much of the fighting the author claims to have done. Instead, we see him sneak in and out of Uganda almost aimlessly and without proper coordination of his activities. Amin seems to have had a ruthlessly efficient intelligence network, and therefore, Museveni and his colleagues stood no credible chance against Amin without the mass support that the Tanzanians gave in 1978, following Amin's invasion of the Kagera Salient of Tanzania that year.

Another observation that one easily makes is that once the Tanzanians and their Ugandan counterparts had driven Amin's soldiers out of Tanzanian territory, and were now pursuing them inside Uganda, Museveni's interests were elsewhere. It seems that Museveni and his company were mainly playing the scouting role rather than being heavily involved in combat. It is also clear that Museveni was more interested at this time, in recruiting and training his own army, the skeleton of his Fronasa (pp. 97-101) for his future use against Ugandans.

In chapter nine, the author's ambitions cannot be hidden. It is clear that Museveni wanted a leading role at the Moshi Conference of 1979. This partly explains why he was at logger heads with the Obote groups and other groups. To him, Obote was the stumbling block to his wish to rise quickly and easily to the highest position in Uganda, the presidency. This to me, really explains his return to the Bush; not so much that the 1980 elections had been rigged. There could have been some flaws in the conduct of the elections but why is it that the Democratic Party (DP), which supposedly won the elections (but were 'denied' the chance to form the new government), did not go to the bush but instead decided to be in the opposition in parliament? No reasonable

Ugandan expected Museveni or his party the Uganda Patriotic Movement (UPM) to win the elections, simply because the UPM was too 'young'. No wonder Museveni himself lost his constituency although he tries to find scapegoats (the UPC), for losing the contest or parliamentary seat. He refuses to join the more established parties like DP not so much because they were 'sectarian' but because he knew that he had no chance to become president via such parties because he would not only be new in these parties, but a nonentity.

When fighting the Obote administration, as usual, the bragging Museveni downplays the losses on his side and magnifies the losses on the government side. He gives the false impression that the government forces were no match for his small army which was lacking in arms, which in itself is a contradiction. To the contrary, there is ample evidence to show that Museveni and his bandits (as they were referred to by the government side), had been driven out of the Lowero Triangle by the time of the July 1985 coup against Obote. But Museveni, the man who believes he is invincible, calls his flight from the Lowero Triangle to his home region in the west, 'opening the Second Front', and believes so (pp. 163-165). In the same vein, he characterises his flight to Sweden as going 'to do some diplomatic work in the knowledge of the imminent and certain collapse of Obote's government' (p. 164).

What a figment of imagination! The fall of the Obote government was principally out of the contradictions that arose from the Okello military junta and the Museveni groups had virtually nothing to do with it since they had already been flushed out of their main operation zones, the Lowero Triangle. So, Museveni can hardly claim credit for the fall of Obote and for him to do so, would be falsifying Uganda's history.

Luck was on his side against the Okellos. Another glaring omission in the book is in the author's personal role in Uganda's foreign policy near and far. The author should have said something (even if by way of denying), his role in the Great Lakes crisis. This in face of accusations of his 'meddling', in other countries' affairs; in Rwanda, Zaire, Sudan, Kenya. Does the author see his diplomacy in the region in the same positive way as he views his struggles against 'dictatorship' in Uganda? How about his later involvement with the Bretton Woods Institutions and the West generally, having initially castigated them? He should have told us something about the role of the West in the retrenchment of soldiers and civil servants; why he made this about-turn in dealing with the West. All these seem to be deliberate concealment which amount to dishonesty on the part of the author.

Thus, the book seems to be a product of the Hollywood film industry. Museveni is on the stage acting. He , therefore, sounds like, 'Read me and accept me'. But this cowboy-like approach to scholarship demeans the author himself. The story is not an objective account; so one finds little to read and judge independently. It is, instead, a well-tailored public relations tale. The book is more of a caricatured or bastardised historical account and less of an autobiography. There is an entirely unnecessary chapter (chapter four entitled, 'A Brief Historical Review' which is really awful. It reads more like an elementary political history text. Brief concise commentaries could have sufficed. Whether or not Ugandans are indeed safely nestling under the branches of the grown mustard seed — this grand biblical allusion — of freedom and general wellbeing, is for each individual to judge. In our opinion, it is a mockery bordering on sacrilege.