"God's justice will triumph," says an evangelical Ugandan now studying in America

Uganda's Reign of Terror

F. K. Sempangi

In the reprisals following Idi Amin's 1971 coup in Uganda the mayor of Masaka, a town in West Buganda, was dragged from his house by Nubians paid by the General. A crowd gathered. The mayor asked to speak to the new chief of state by telephone. Amin's killers—"soldiers" is too good a word for them—stripped him, bound his hands, and tied a rope around his neck. The chief killer drew a knife, cut off the mayor's penis, and, holding it in front of the screaming man, told him he could call Kampala through the severed organ.

Onlookers were dumbfounded, relatives wept; the Nubians laughed.

Mutilation and death by political assassination were common throughout Uganda in 1971, the year I returned there with my family from graduate study in Europe. The next year brought more of the same, and the next. When Amin unleashed his torturers on evangelical Christians in 1973, we were forced to flee.

The reign of terror continues.

An obnoxious Anyanya clique is responsible, along with Amin, for Uganda's disgraceful situation. The Anyanya, a mixed group of Nubian descent, control the army and have replaced former President Milton Obote's paramilitary general service corps.

Before Amin unseated Obote on January 25, 1971, when the president was out of the country, the Ugandan army, with Amin as commander, had sporadically fought the Anyanya along the northern border. That Amin was personally involved with his presumed foe is evidenced by the fact that he immediately recruited 1,500 Anyanya after the coup and soon increased the number to 3,000.

Amin and the Anyanya have turned Uganda back from the independence it received from Britain in 1962 and have paralyzed every hope of progress. The present Ugandan dictatorship is a tragic example of an externalized personal animosity. Samuel Decalo concluded (Journal of Modern African Studies, 1972) that the coup represents "a classic example of a personalized take-over caused by a general's own fears and ambitions within the context of a widespread civil malaise and a fissiparous fratricidal army rife with corporate grievances."

The General's desperation figured in the 1972 expulsion of 80,000 Asians, his tirades against Israel, and his telegram to U.N. Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim praising Hitler's genocidal policy toward the Jews. That telegram was a staggering shock to many Ugandan Christians, who were forced to agree with Willy Brandt that Amin had a "deranged" mind.

What but a deranged, paranoid mind would order henchmen, not even in uniform, to arrest people in shops, banks, offices, and on the street for no apparent reason. They were dragged, beaten, and squashed into automobile trunks. Victims of Amin's indiscriminate murderers simply disappear; torsos are dumped in the forest and heads thrown to the crocodiles.

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In June, 1971, we were back in Uganda with high professional hopes and a passionate desire to proclaim Christ. I had a teaching job at the School of Fine Art, Makerere University, my alma mater in Kampala. My wife Penina started as a nursing sister at Mulango, the country's largest hospital. Penina qualified as a midwife nurse in London while I was studying at the Royal College of Art. For a year before leaving Europe we lived in Holland, where I began a doctoral program in art history with Professor H.R. Rookmaaker at the Free University in Amsterdam.

Five months after our homecoming we opened Bible classes in our house. With some students we launched radio and television programs, and soon the house group grew into a church. We moved to a YMCA building and eventually into the open. Our community of twenty became a congregation of four thousand.

Then all Christian programs were banned from the air waves. A native pastor was accused of treason and then killed for reading on a regular church broadcast an Old Testament prophecy of Israel's future triumph over its enemies. He was charged with supporting the modern Jewish cause.

Although denied access to mass media, our church continued to grow—from four thousand to twelve thousand. People from all walks of life turned to the Lord. Five secret police spies sent to monitor my sermons were converted.

One aim of our church was to encourage young people of talent to go abroad for ministerial training. I had an opportunity to discuss this interest with Professor Rookmaaker and officials of the L'Abri Fellowship in April, 1975, when I went to Holland, taking my family, to present papers for my doctoral finals. L'Abri, the Swiss-based evangelical organization led by Dr. Francis Schaeffer, agreed to sponsor three of our young people in its Bible orientation course.

Despite the misgivings of friends and a warning that I should travel incognito, we returned to Uganda in September. We were intercepted at Entebbe Airport by those who loved us, and taken into hiding. Church elders came in the night to brief me on recent events. Amin's Nubians had decided to arrest and kill me. Two days earlier the secret police had gone to church headquarters, fired their weapons, molested people, and made arbitrary arrests. They were furious when I was not among those seized. Our people were released after interrogation.

Our house was invaded the very day of our return. I learned also that three weeks previously Amin's forces had set out to murder the Reverend Adoniya Kirinda, the man I left in charge of the church in my absence. The Nubians found a new convert in Kirinda's house and, because the man was well dressed, mistook him for the minister. They shot the convert eight times, dragged the body outside, and drove over it with a
Two days in Uganda and a report came that our hiding place was known to the police. We had about fifteen minutes to plan an escape. The chain of events in our leaving can only be attributed to God. Since we had tickets if we could get to an airport outside Uganda, we traveled by bus toward the Kenya border. It was a risk. Could we get past the Ugandan border patrol? I felt gloomy. Near midnight we approached the checkpoint. The guards were drunk.

I stepped out of the bus as an officer walked up. He asked if I had any money. Without thinking, I took out all I had. God used my ignorance to save me from the gun. No one is supposed to cross the border with more than 150 shillings in currency. I had more than 800.

"You have too much," the guard said. "Now begin counting it into my hand."

While I counted he watched to make sure his fellow officers were not aware of the transaction. He told me to board the bus, and in five minutes we were crossing into Kenya. We flew to Holland, where I made arrangements to come to Westminster Seminary in the United States.

We were not the only people to feel Amin’s heavy hand in 1973. The government expelled the foreign staff and closed down local societies of Campus Crusade for Christ, the Navigators, Child Evangelism, and Pentecostal groups.

Other members of our congregation have been forced to flee. Two were recently stranded in Nairobi. A Christian group in Washington, D.C., offered air fare to Switzerland, where Dr. Schaeffer provided short-term scholarships at L’Abri. The chance to develop new relationships, such as those with L’Abri, is, we feel, a good thing. Ugandan Christians need new ties to replace the old missionary structures. What Idi Amin’s government means for evil, God means for good.

To explain why new Christian structures and relationships are required Uganda’s church history must be sketched, and that history cannot be divorced from the colonialism that helped to put the country where it is today.
Mwanga played the Protestants among his people against the Catholics, the Christians against the Muslims. He ordered missionaries out in 1888 and was then himself deposed, only to regain power in 1890 with the help of the Imperial British East Africa Company. Chartered in 1888 to develop a British sphere of influence in the region, the company offered military aid to Mwanga in exchange for commercial and territorial concessions.

The Christians appealed to the company representative for protection and made their way back into Buganda. British presence gave Anglicanism special protection. Increasingly bitter relations between Protestants and Catholics led to the infamous Battle of Mengo in 1892. Within six years of its founding the East Africa Company went bankrupt. The government of Her Majesty Queen Victoria declared Buganda a protectorate in 1894, and eventually the Union Jack flew over the whole of Uganda. Mwanga was deposed in 1897.

Few missionaries were to be found in Uganda between 1892 and 1904. Mackay died in 1890, and no one of his stature replaced him. Bishop Alfred Tucker came out to replace the slain Bishop Hannington. George Pikington of the Church Missionary Society (Anglican) was translating the Bible into Bugandan.

Evangelism, however, was at its zenith, with indigenous preachers taking the leadership. In 1892 there were 260 native evangelists with eighty-five stations in and around Buganda. Those who escaped martyrdom under Mwanga returned from exile with the Gospel as a two-edged sword. Prominent among the Ugandan evangelists was Apolo Kivebulaya, who journeyed as far as Mboga in the Congo. Evangelism was in the style of Dwight L. Moody and the Keswick Conventions, those annual Cumberland meetings dating back to Moody's first work in England. Thousands were converted.

"When will they learn that Christianity is cosmopolitan and not anglican?" Mackay had written to his sister. It seemed that his hope was being realized in Uganda. Then missionaries returned in force.

John V. Taylor and C.F. Hastings, both historians of East African Christianity, agree that an influx of foreign missionaries into Uganda in the early years of this century damaged the life of the church, discouraged indigenous participation, and diminished Christian initiative.

In 1904 there were at least seventy-nine Church Missionary Society appointees in Uganda, eighty-three with the White Fathers' mission and thirty-five Mill Hill Fathers. Just as local tunes of praise were replaced by imported liturgies, the spiritual leadership of tribal chiefs in the church was ended by the foreigners. Supported by the new CMS people, Bishop Tucker, the Anglican prelate, centralized the church away from local communities where it had established itself. Namirembe became the cathedral of the central administration.

The education of clergy was a matter of confusion and controversy. Bishop Tucker was diverted from an unwise plan to raise ministerial training to the level of that in Europe, but the situation that developed left local Anglican clergy with almost no education. Ignorant priests posed an acute problem for decades, causing the educated minority to look critically at the church and making the ministry an unattractive option for the young. One missionary retired, another took his place. Leadership was kept in foreign hands.

Uganda was to produce no theology for the same reason that the University of East Africa was founded with no departments of law, philosophy, mining, and industry. Law is not taught to people the authorities want to control.

David Livingstone died in 1873, but his "double influence of the Spirit of Commerce and the Gospel of Christ," to use Owen Chadwick's phrase, imbued his immediate successors and faded only slowly in the twentieth century. In Livingstone's formula the introduction of Western civilization—especially the arts and sciences—was prerequisite to individual conversion to Christianity. Christianity, in turn, was to provide commercial outlets to industrialized Europe.

Missionaries going to East Africa were charged with distributing cotton seeds as well as salvation. Grow cotton, they said. Nothing was done to show Africans how to process cotton.

Contrary to Livingstone's view, Christianity is not the child of civilization. As Arnold Toynbee has shown, civilization is a fruit of Christianity. Livingstone thought humanistic expectation, affluence, and proficiency in arts and sciences could produce and safeguard a religious faith. The fact is that the church can retrogress and a culture can disintegrate at the height of material prosperity and intellectual genius.

The missionaries who dominated African education prior to World War II perpetuated Livingstone's commitment to Western civilization as a divine force. They were prone to suggest that the Fall affected only part of the human race—not, of course, their part. World War II demonstrated the universality of human iniquity. After Dachau and Hiroshima, the heirs of Livingstone could not brush aside what Francis Schaeffer calls the "manliness of man" in order to talk of more pleasant things.

Africans saw the so-called "civilized" nations at war. Over 370,000 Africans served in the British Army in World War II; 15,000 fought for the French in Indochina; 30,000 in Algeria, and others at Suez. "An African learned he fought and suffered to preserve the freedom he did not have back home," Ndabaningi Sithole writes in African Nationalism.
Ugandans saw the hypocrisy of "civilized" Christians. My brother returned from World War II preaching the religion of the three W's: war, women, and wine, and never went to church again. He said that what the Europeans tell you in church is not what he saw them do in war. The missionary double standard was exposed.

Voluminous literature is readily available on the people the missionaries went to evangelize, but only recently have scholars thought about studying the missionaries' ethnicity, class, and economic backgrounds. Such study has been strongly advocated by T.O. Beidelman. Perhaps some day we will know more about the dark side of the individuals who took Christ and Commerce to Uganda. General theories about the movement itself are about all we have now.

Most sources agree that the evangelical mission movement had its origin in Europe's industrial revolution. It was in part an extension of the reaction against the wretched, "godless" conditions of industrial workers violently snatched from familiar agrarian life. John Flint adds that the industrial revolution drove Europeans into Africa looking for raw materials. Christ and Commerce: Livingstone provided an apt rationale for what was happening.

Missionaries who may have left Liverpool disgusted with industrialization publicly condemned, once in Africa, what they privately condemned. They presented Christianity as an element of Western culture, but they were not always generous with some of the most highly valued ingredients of their civilization—education, for example.

Beidelman, working as an anthropologist at Kaguru, Tanzania, concluded that missionaries were ambiguous in terms of their own cultural identities, uncertain in their transmission of information, and therefore elusive at every point of communication. He observed that Anglican missionaries were particularly given to withholding from natives the education they verbally praised. Beidelman writes:

Throughout its stay in Kaguru, the C.M.S. resisted training Africans in practical skills such as carpentry, printing, tailoring and metal work. Other missionaries, Protestant and Catholic alike, fostered such training and brought out artisan missionaries, much to their advantage in securing converts and developing their stations. It is not entirely clear why the C.M.S. at the London headquarters held to this impractical and self-defeating line, but it may be that these policy-makers were influenced by C.M.S. difficulties with draftsmen-traders, missionaries and converts during the West African expansion of the C.M.S. decades earlier. It may be that a tinge of unworldliness and militant anti-materialism survived as a product of the earlier "conversion" of leading members of this group into evangelical activities. Clearly the reasons for these policies relate to values and beliefs not essentially part of basic Christian theology. It is obvious that cultural factors must be considered in determining the full implications and variations in the beliefs and policies of any missionary group.

I quote Beidelman at length because what he says is still characteristic of missionary institutions I know. A missionary who takes the initiative in providing practical training to a native can expect an invitation to leave from his fellow missionaries. Skilled natives at a station are a threat to the mission organization. Friends of mine working in Uganda with a California-based agency were suspended for requesting additional training. "Training" is anathema because it leads to "equal opportunity." I support Beidelman's proposal for thorough study of the background and attitudes of missionaries and their institutions. When well-meaning, professing Christians manifest patterns of behavior that contradict Scripture, we ought to find out why.

Meanwhile, Africa is throwing missionaries out. As concerted efforts are made to speed up decolonization, institutions that seem to undermine new policies and encourage alienation provoke intense reactions. Traditional missionary operations are in trouble with Africa's new political ideologies, although those ideologies are not necessarily desirable substitutes for colonialism. There is, of course, no one school of African political thought today. Leopold Senghor of Senegal, borrowing a term from West Indian poet Aimé Cesaire, advocates "Negritude," or the reaffirmation of the African personality. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania is chief proponent of African socialism based on a system of self-reliance somewhere between capitalism and Marxism. Pan-Africanism has its own special history going back to 1900, but as interpreted by the late Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana it is a plan to create a United States of Africa.

Too many of the new ideologies produce states of terror. Christians, not mission institutions but native Christians, many with no missionary affiliation, become prime targets. Missionaries were merely expelled by Ngarta Tombalbaye of Chad. It was the native pastors and the laity who were massacred and tortured for refusing to undergo the pagan Yondo initiation as demanded by Tombalbaye's policy of "Chaditude."

Physical brutality is not the only unfortunate result of some new African ideologies. Spiritual and cultural damages are also inflicted. Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism is a good illustration. When the former Ghanaian leader formed his Peoples' Party, he told followers: "Seek ye first the political kingdom." He left no room for religion in the secular kingdom. Nkrumah spoke of forging a philosophy from the "environment and living conditions of the African people," but by negating religion he denied African culture and left the African mind vulnerable to foreign influences.

Nkrumah's secularism was a Marxist interpretation
of the missionary prejudice that told Africans their tribal languages had no word for God. That was not and is not true. Virtually every tribe has stories about God. God has been in dialogue with Africans from time immemorial.

In October, 1969, President Obote launched a socialist revolution in Uganda with his Charter for the Common Man. I was at the Royal College of Art in London and treasurer of the Ugandan student association. We held several meetings on the situation at home, where party lines were still strong and people feared Obote’s agents, especially after he was wounded in a December assassination attempt.

Michael Lofchie explains (Journal of African Studies, May, 1972) opposition to Obote’s move to the left in terms of military displeasure with the Charter for the Common Man. Ugandan army officers were drawing large salaries that placed them on a par with civil service ministers. They could not tolerate the charter’s threat to their income and status.

Obote’s downfall was partly due to his inability to believe that Idi Amin had enough brains to plan a successful coup d’état. Amin has no ideology. He acts on intuition. He calls himself “president” but rules at the level of a local chief. Amin rarely understands the implications of politics, and his “plans” are social reflex actions. The Asians were expelled to compensate the public for thousands of Ugandans killed by the army. Evangelical missionaries were deported to appease the Muslims, and Amin fabricated anti-Jewish dreams to delight the Arabs, without whose financing he cannot stay in power.

Many political paranoids, including Amin, rule by virtue of the silent majority in whose name government becomes the agent of evil. Jean-Paul Sartre considers the passivity of the silent an active participation in evil. “Your passivity serves only to place you in the ranks of the oppressors,” he wrote in the introduction to Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth.

Passivity is encouraged in the modern cause-oriented world, a world where leaders are more concerned about the success of policies than about the welfare of their people. Yet, ironically, individualism is taught to the young, even as impersonal policies and impersonal institutions are dehumanizing us. A friend of mine arrived in California to visit the headquarters of a mission organization for which he worked. He wanted to see the “boss.” The boss did not know who he was. My friend learned that all correspondence with field staff and the signing of salary checks was done by computer. He had risked his life in Uganda for a machine!

The international machinery designed to protect human rights has done little or nothing about Amin’s violations. Slaughter of Ugandans is an “internal matter” in the view of the Organization of African Unity. The U.N. was concerned about the Asians expelled, but has paid no attention to other appeals. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is on paper; mass murder in Uganda does not provide sufficient cause for intervention.

Christian conversions are still taking place in Uganda. God’s justice will some day end the reign of terror.