WORKING WITH CULTURE ON THE PERIPHERIES OF IDI AMIN’S UGANDA

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September 2017
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Kellogg Institute for International Studies
Working Paper #424 – September 2017

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The research for this paper was funded by the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). It was written in large part at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame. I thank the director, Paolo Carozza, and the Institute’s staff, especially Denise Wright, for their generous hospitality during the period of my fellowship.
ABSTRACT

This paper is about the prosaic work that it took to constitute sites of memory in Idi Amin’s Uganda. Why, at a time when government and economy were so dysfunctional, at a time when tens of thousands of people were killed by the malevolent agents of state security, did earnest and high-minded men and women invest themselves in the project of cultural recovery? This paper focuses on an obscure bureaucrat, a man named John Tumusiime, who from 1972 to 1976 was the ‘Culture Officer’ of Kigezi, the southernmost district in Uganda. Men like Tumusiime thought themselves on the front lines of a globally consequential effort to revivify African culture. Even in the face of tremendous logistical difficulties, their commitment and ingenuity led them to seek out venues where the lessons of the past could be concretized, hard-coded in the collective lives of their people.

RESUMEN

Este es un artículo acerca del trabajo prosaico que tomó constituir los sitios de la memoria en la Uganda de Idi Amin. En un momento con un gobierno y una economía tan disfuncionales, en un momento en el que agentes malévolos de la seguridad del Estado mataban decenas de miles de personas, ¿por qué hombres y mujeres determinados y nobles se embarcaron en un proyecto de recuperación cultural? Este artículo se centra en un oscuro burócrata, un hombre llamado John Tumusiine, quien entre 1972 y 1976 fue Oficial de Cultura de Kigezi, el distrito más austral de Uganda. Los hombres como Tumusiine creían estar a la vanguardia de un esfuerzo de revitalización de la cultura africana con consecuencias globales. Aún enfrentando dificultades logísticas tremenda, su compromiso y su ingenio los llevaron a explorar sitios en los que se pudiera hacer concretas las lecciones del pasado cifradas en las vidas colectivas de sus pueblos.
There was no ‘anti-politics machine’ in Idi Amin’s Uganda.¹ To the contrary: the bureaucrats of local government were drawn into the dramas and projects of high politics. The international arena was never far away. High politics imposed itself on the very fabric of local government work. Here there was no escape into technocratic expertise. In every obscure corner of government work there were battles to fight and win. There was a ‘Double Production Campaign’ to increase the yield of cotton farms; a ‘Keep Uganda Clean’ campaign to clean up urban space; an ‘Economic War’ to encourage African-run business.² Areas of administrative work that had, in colonial times, been apparently technical in nature were, in the 1970s, rendered urgently political. Local government authorities found themselves on the front lines. In Kasese District, in Uganda’s far west, the bureaucrats of local government were told to ‘ask not what our country can do for you, but what you can at all costs do for the good of your country and welfare of her people. Hard work. Perseverance. Self-reliance. Patriotism’.³ Amin himself told government chiefs, gathered at a training course in Kampala, that ‘everyone is a small president in his respective area. Whatever you do, do it in the name of the President’.⁴

In the domain of cultural administration there were particularly urgent matters to attend to. There was a vast expansion in the field of collecting and conservation, as heretofore forgettable places and objects were redefined, almost overnight, as things of political importance. Never before had history seemed so consequential. As the director of the Department of Antiquities put it in a 1975 report, ‘seldom has such a small group of people been given a broader mandate or a more exciting or challenging responsibility’.⁵ New staff were hired to discover, curate, and maintain sites of heritage: in 1975 the Department of Antiquities employed 16 people at the Kasubi Tombs, 19 people at the tombs of the Nyoro king Kabalega, and 6 people at the remote fort at Patiko, over 70 people in all. They catered to a significant contingent of travellers, both domestic and international, who were interested in what we now call ‘cultural

³Kasese District Archives, Uganda (hereafter KaseseDA) ‘Reports, District Team correspondence’: Communication from the chair, n.d. (but late 1970s).
tourism’. In 1975 9,681 people visited the Kasubi Tombs, where the kings of Buganda lay, and 1,036 people visited the site of the ancient rock paintings in Nyero.⁶

In this paper I focus on one obscure bureaucrat, a man named John Tumusiime, who from 1972 to 1976 was the ‘District Culture Officer’ of Kigezi, Uganda’s southernmost district. It is not that Tumusiime was particularly effective in his work. To the contrary: the heritage institutions he helped to build did not outlast the 1970s. That is the point. My interest here is in the prosaic work that it took to constitute tradition and culture in Idi Amin’s Uganda. The infrastructures of heritage are fragile. It takes concrete, wire fences, brass plaques, glass display cases, and other things to transform material objects and physical spaces into sites of memory. And it takes maintenance and repair to ensure that the objects of heritage—once defined—do not decay. Heritage work entails reclamation, the freezing of time, the mythologization of characters, the separation of hitherto unremarkable spaces and things and their investiture as inviolate. All of that is hard work. Repairs are always needed. And—especially in places where materials such as concrete and wire are in short supply—it takes human ingenuity to achieve the ‘museum effect’.⁷

My interest here is in understanding where John Tumusiime—and other of Uganda’s culture officers—found their vocation from. Why, at a time when government and economy were so dysfunctional, at a time when tens of thousands of people were killed by the malevolent agents of state security, did earnest and high-minded men and women invest themselves in the project of cultural recovery?

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In the wake of World War II the scaling up of the global tourist industry had obliged the governments of colonial Africa to define and market themselves to an increasingly mobile travelling public. The ‘International Congress of African Touring’, held in October 1949, had encouraged African colonial governments to ‘recognize the importance of preserving objects of scientific, aesthetic, geological or other scientific interest, in order to complete the variety of attractions available to the touring public’.⁸ A 1950 tourist brochure advertising Uganda’s attractions told visitors that ‘this is the land of Livingstone’s explorations, the scene—in those

not-so-long-ago days—of Stanley’s Travels in Darkest Africa’. Dotted across Uganda there were memorials to the heroism of British explorers and missionaries. In the north there were monuments where the fortifications of Emin Pasha and Samuel Baker had once stood. In Busoga there was a memorial to the martyrdom of Bishop Hannington. By the late 1950s the desk-bound bureaucrats of the colonial establishment—distant heirs of the heroic tradition—were working to ensure that the memory of an earlier age would not be forgotten. In 1957 the district commissioner in Kigezi set to work erecting markers on the location of important events in the region’s colonial history: thus the site of the original government station in the district was newly marked, as was the place where the anti-colonial rebel Muhumuza had been captured. That same year Uganda’s director of public works erected a concrete obelisk, a platform, and a shelter on the west bank of the Nile to mark the site of Speke’s discovery of the river’s headwaters. The place had formerly been marked with an iron peg. These monuments were meant to build the memory of the civilizing mission into Uganda’s landscape. In 1958 an angry British official objected to a new proposal that would allow African-run local councils to identify sites of historical importance. ‘This might very well open the door to extremist politicians agitating for the abolition of sites connected with British historical significance’, he argued. The concrete legacy of British colonialism was a monumental architecture that left little space for the remembrance of African political initiative.

After Uganda’s independence the government of Milton Obote paid scant attention to political history. In 1968 the Ministry of Culture and Tourism produced a series of Christmas cards and posters that advertised Uganda to tourists and visitors. The posters featured scenes of cultural significance—photos of dancing festivals, for instance, or of circumcision ceremonies. When asked by the Ministry of Tourism to name historically important sites in Kigezi district, the local government officer replied with a list of beautiful places: the Birunga Mountains as

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9 UNA CSO 64/11861/I: Undated flier (but 1950).
10 KabaleDA Public Works 26, ‘Historical Monuments’ file: District Commissioner Kigezi to Secretary General, Chief Judge and all county chiefs, 11 October 1957.
13 KabaleDA Public Works 26, ‘Historical Monuments’ file: P.S. for Tourism to all District Commissioners and culture officers, 7 August 1968.
viewed from the Kanaba Gap; the hot springs of Karungu.\textsuperscript{14} There was nothing about conflict, war, or politics on the Ministry of Tourism’s Christmas cards. Officials of the Obote government expected that the tourist business would ‘reflect mostly the African cultural and personality’ and encouraged hotel owners to ‘concentrate on the African way of life’\textsuperscript{15} But they paid no attention to Uganda’s political history.

It was Idi Amin’s government that sought to reengineer Uganda’s monumental architecture. In September 1971—a few months after taking power—President Amin loaded the British high commissioner into his personal helicopter and flew with him to Kangai, in the northern part of the country, there to lay the foundation stone for two monuments on the sites where the anti-colonial war leaders Kabalega and Mwanga had been captured by British forces in 1899. The sites were decidedly inconspicuous: they lay on either side of a minor road, in a remote part of Uganda, at a place that had never before been marked. But Amin was convinced that there were lessons to be learnt on those humble grounds. ‘Contrary to what one might suppose after reading foreign historians, Africans did play an active part in their own history’, he said. If the ‘Banyoro, Baganda and Langi had joined forces then, why could they not work together now?’\textsuperscript{16} The plaque that was erected at the site drove the point home: it read ‘After a long struggle against foreign domination, Omukama Kabalega was captured here by British troops on 9\textsuperscript{th} April 1899’.\textsuperscript{17} There was a proliferation of memorial sites, as hitherto unremarkable sites and objects were made into evidence of Ugandans’ enduring struggle against British oppression. The Department of Antiquities made an appeal for members of the public to ‘bring to our attention monuments of historical significance, rock paintings or any peculiar stone that can be found in your areas’.\textsuperscript{18} From Kigezi, the district’s culture officer sent in a list of ‘ancient and historical sites’, featuring hot springs, a disused leprosy camp, a wolfram mine, and several caves

\textsuperscript{14}KabaleDA Public Works 26, ‘Historical Monuments’ file: Administrative Secretary, Kigezi to D.C. Kigezi, 21 October 1968.
\textsuperscript{15}KabaleDA Public Works 26, ‘Historical Monuments’ file: Principal, Institute of Public Administration to D.C. Kigezi, 19 October 1970.
\textsuperscript{16}British National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom (hereafter BNA) FCO 31/1018: Slater, British High Commission, to East African Department, 5 October 1971.
wherein ‘people used to hide during war’.

In Mparo, near Hoima, local people pointed out a ‘medium sized shrub with proliferating branches and diminutive leaves’ that was supposed to have been planted by King Kabalega. It was said that he had sacrificed nine men, nine cows, nine goats, and nine chickens on the occasion when the tree was planted.

In November 1971—shortly after Idi Amin inaugurated the memorial to Kabalega’s capture—the curator of the Uganda National Museum acquired a spear measuring 55 centimeters in the blade. It was said to have belonged to Kabalega himself. In 1972 the Amin government lodged a request with the British Museum for the return of the Luzira Head, the most famous archaeological object discovered in eastern Africa, which had been taken from Uganda by a British scholar in 1929.

And in 1977 the president’s secretary wrote to Uganda’s provincial governors about the need for archival preservation. ‘These documents depict our national heritage’, he wrote. They were ‘the instruments from which the present and future generations can learn about the history of this nation in its correct perspective’.

What accounts for this sudden surge of interest in history and archaeology? In one sense the Amin government was responding to the changing architecture of global governance in the domain of heritage management. In November 1972 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization adopted the Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage. The convention authorized the creation of a new ‘World Heritage Committee’ and obliged signatory governments to adopt a ‘general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community’.

As Laurajane Smith and other scholars of heritage studies have shown, the 1972 convention encouraged specialists to concretize otherwise changeable and shifting structures, creating a permanent record—a monument—that could be handed down to posterity.

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22BNA FCO 31/1359: Uganda Ministry of Foreign Affairs to British High Commission, 22 March 1972.
attended the conference where the convention was discussed, and thereafter Uganda held an elected seat on UNESCO’s executive board.\textsuperscript{26} The UNESCO convention was one part of a larger apparatus of international regulation that was meant to encourage the inventorying, classification, and preservation of cultural property. In December 1972 a meeting of the ‘African Cultural Council’ at the Organization of African Unity headquarters in Addis Ababa determined that a ‘list of African cultural objects such as the stool, spear, xylophone, bow and arrow, lyre, harp and others, together with their photos, should be sent to the OAU secretariat’. Thereafter Uganda’s principal culture officer directed government officers in the provinces to ‘photograph all cultural objects in your district’, sending a list and description of them to Kampala for transmission to Addis Ababa.\textsuperscript{27} In 1973 Uganda sent a large delegation to a seminar, organized by the Organization of African Unity, on ‘Arts and Culture in Africa’. The seminar urged the African artist to ‘expose himself [\textit{sic.}] thoroughly to the traditional art influences, digest them and bring them out with new vision’ and encouraged African states to be ‘vigilant and provide appropriate machinery and legislation for the safeguarding of African cultural heritage’.\textsuperscript{28}

But there were more specific reasons—beyond international organizations’ exhortations—for the Amin government’s eager investment in the documenting of cultural property. To an extent that exceeded other African states, Amin’s government positioned itself on the front line of an ongoing war against the neocolonial control of European powers. The expulsion of Uganda’s South Asian community in 1972 was conceived and pursued as an exercise in racial self-assertion, a struggle to reclaim the heights of the economy from British subjects. Amin called it the ‘Economic War’. The British ‘dared not admit that it was they who, during the colonial era, deliberately erected concrete political, corporate and social barriers which separated the races…systematically keeping the African the underdog in his [\textit{sic.}] own motherland, downtrodden by the Europeans and Asians’, Amin argued.\textsuperscript{29} Businesses and buildings that Asians had hitherto owned were handed over to African proprietors. Amin described the process as ‘economic emancipation and salvation’. It was ‘the period when Uganda

\textsuperscript{26}Kabale\text{DA Public Works 23, ‘Monuments’ file: Department of Antiquities monthly report, November 1974.}
\textsuperscript{27}Kabale\text{DA Community Development 17, ‘Festivals and Competitions’ file: Z. Adolu to all culture officers, 21 September 1973.}
\textsuperscript{28}Kabale\text{DA Comm. 20, ‘Drama’ file: Report on the OAU seminar on Arts and Culture in Africa, Addis Ababa, 22 to 25 October 1973.}
broke free from colonial, imperialistic and Zionist bondage’.  

All of this entailed the reworking of public space and the relabeling of geography. In July 1973 Idi Amin and Zairian president Mobutu Sese Seko visited Arua, in northwestern Uganda, where they rechristened what had formerly been Lake Albert with the name ‘Lake Mobutu Sese Seko’. A few days later they likewise renamed Lake Edward, christening it Lake Idi Amin Dada in what the newspapers called a ‘colorful ceremony’ at a lakeside fishing village. Mobutu told the assembled crowd that the renaming of the lakes was ‘another step in the decolonization of the minds of the people…. This is done to give dignity to our independence and Africa as a whole’. Throughout Uganda local government officials were obliged to rename streets and public buildings that had hitherto been born British names. It had to be done at very short notice: in December 1972 the Ministry of Public Service gave town clerks two weeks to find names that would ‘fit with this country’s economic, social and political aspirations’. So it was that, in Kabale town, Archer Road became Makobore Road; Cohen Road became Kangwagye Road; and Sharp Dormitory in Kigezi College became Lumumba Dormitory.

History had never before been so urgent. There was a pressing need for an inspirational past, for people, styles, sites and objects that could furnish Ugandans with a distinctive historical repertoire to name and celebrate. Here was a project in which a great many people felt inspired to participate. In the domain of music, the Ministry of Education introduced ‘African Traditional Music’ into the repertoire for school music festivals in 1973. Within a year the composer Cosma Warugaba had composed a series of short operas, plays, and song books, written in vernacular languages, for sale to music teachers. Warugaba reminded educators that ‘it is you, and no other, to promote, improve, and propagate your own culture. Your music is just as good as any other and can be used, with pride, in churches, concert halls, dance halls, at international gatherings etc.’ His song book was 80 pages long and featured 16 tunes. In historical research, too, the times demanded new and renovated material. In 1975 the Department of Antiquities

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brought out a short book on *Kabalega and the History of Uganda* in the newly revived ‘Uganda’s Famous Men’ series. The book was said to portray Kabalega as he ‘fell victim to forces of colonialism and imperialism and not as a rebellious and barbaric King as he had been labeled by the British colonialists’. In the domain of dance, the national dance troupe—the Heartbeat of Africa—was revived in 1974. Each district was invited to send five dancers to Kampala, where they were trained in a specific repertoire: from Acholi, the Otole, Bwola, and Araka-Oraka dances; from Kigezi, the Intole, Batwa, and Katigururo dances.

All of this cultural work was an act of invention. It involved the codification and clarification of hitherto dynamic styles and songs, the expropriation of bits of land from ordinary use and its redefinition as sacred ground, the elevation of formerly disputable figures and their refabrication as heroes. Conservation entailed reification, separation, the freezing of time and agency. The effort to conserve and protect heritage always stood in tension with the human propensity to forget, to remake, to reuse, to reframe. So it is that, in October 1974, the conservator of antiquities angrily noted that the burial mound of Suna II—one of Buganda’s kings—had recently become the site of a building project, as a householder had begun to erect a house on the premises. That same month the conservator noted that the memorials at Bukaleba and Fort Thurston—sites of the famous Uganda mutiny of 1897—had been demolished. Three memorial plaques had been wrenched off. In 1975 the conservator reported that a wire fence had recently been erected around the Muganzirwazza earthwork, which had been erected by prisoners of Buganda’s king in the late 19th century. Here was a kind of ‘fortress conservation’, in which wire fences served to demarcate and define the properties of national history. But the fence had been compromised by playful children, who made a game of swinging on the wires, causing them to bend and break. The conservator reported that the ‘kids have been warned off and their parents informed about their behavior’.

In the realm of performance culture, as in the domain of monuments and memorials, the human propensity to renovate always outran the official effort to standardize and conserve. The district culture officers who superintended the creation and presentation of local performance

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37KabaleDA Community Development 21, ‘Culture Activities’ file: E. Galabuzi-Mukasa, national coordinator, to all culture officers, 16 August 1974.
traditions knew this very well, for it was they who had to wrangle disputatious, idiosyncratically attired artists into the regimented routines of tradition. Culture officers in Uganda’s provinces were obliged, on very short notice, to marshal troupes of dancers to greet dignitaries who visited their localities. The culture officer in Kigezi District complained that the ‘work of a culture officer has come to be mainly organizing dancers at very short notice, even less than an hour’.40 He arranged to have the district’s leading dance troupe exempted from communal labor, since they were often ‘called on short notice to come and entertain visitors’. The group was to practice their dances during the time that their neighbors were engaged in compulsory communal labor.41 Culture officers paid particular attention to the attire and the routine of the dancing troupes in their districts, ensuring that everything was presented in conformity with traditional aesthetics. When in 1972 a troupe of 22 Batwa pygmies arrived at the Kigezi District culture show attired in rags, the culture officer hastily made his way to a shop, bought cloth, and had tailors stitch new clothing for them in advance of their performance.42 Later that year he prepared an inventory of the dancing traditions of the Kigezi and Ankole districts.43 Each dance was described as if it were the property of a distinctive people. The report began with ‘Kikiga’ dance, the tradition of the ‘Bakiga tribes’. The dance was said to vary in instrumentation and melody in different parts of the district, but ‘what is in common is that it is danced by jumping and hitting the ground very hard with one’s feet’. ‘Kihororo’ dance was said to performed with ‘less vigor’, but ‘the music is very exciting’. This definitional work allowed the culture officer to distinguish the authentic performance from the innovation. In November 1972, when he met with the ‘Cultural Committee’ of Ndorwa county, he announced that he was planning to go on tour, teaching dancing troupes a ‘new style that can be used in our culture’.44

The energetic culture officer’s name was John Tumusiime. Like other government officers in Idi Amin’s Uganda, he felt himself on the front line of a life-and-death struggle over

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cultural imperialism. To an extent that was greater than at any other time in Ugandan history, macro-politics intruded itself upon the mundane machinery of local government. The great events of the age were never far away. John Tumusiime’s files—now held in the recently renovated archives of the Kabale district government—bulge with paperwork about faraway things. There is a copy of the ‘Soviet Women’s Quiz’, sent direct from Russia via the Uganda Women’s Secretariat. Participants were invited to write in with answers to a variety of questions, such as ‘Name two of the first decrees of the Soviet state’. The first prize was a trip to the USSR. There were reports and recommendations from UNESCO, cyclostyled in Kampala and distributed to culture officers. Among them was the report of the ‘Special Committee of Governmental Experts to Prepare a Draft Recommendation Concerning the Prevention and Coverage of Risks to Moveable Cultural Property’, convened by UNESCO in Lisbon in 1978.

The largest tranche of apparently extraneous material in John Tumusiime’s files came from the organizers of FESTAC II, the ‘Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture’, originally planned to be held in Lagos in January 1975 and later postponed to 1977. The reports, minutes, and planning documents generated by the festival’s organizers were duplicated in Kampala by the Ministry of Culture and distributed to Uganda’s far-flung district culture officers. John Tumusiime kept all of them. They are interleaved throughout his files. The file titled ‘Festivals and Competitions’, for instance, contains the earliest planning documents from FESTAC, inserted back-to-back with paperwork and correspondence concerning the ‘Kigezi Cultural Festival’ that Tumusiime organized in Kabale town in 1973.

In its conception FESTAC was meant to be a participatory occasion. The Nigerian government—rich with petrodollars—promised to fund 500 artists and performers from eastern Africa, and each participating country established a working committee to identify individuals and objects that were to be sent to Lagos for the festival. In Uganda the central committee was chaired by Mary Astles, the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Culture and Community Development. There were subcommittees assigned to prepare Uganda’s contribution to the many displays planned for Lagos, chaired by an energetic and opinionated group of academics and artists. From an early date it was decided that the exhibition on liberation movements was to be left to FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique, the Mozambique Liberation Front) to

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45KabaleDA uncatalogued ‘Miscellaneous’ file: Secretary General, Uganda Women’s Secretariat, to all Community Development Officers, 26 May 1977.
organize, and Uganda did not participate in that display. Neither did Uganda take part in the display concerning ‘modern dressing’, as miniskirts and wigs had been banned in 1972. But there was an embroidery subcommittee in Uganda, which sent out calls over the radio encouraging ‘gifted women in embroidery’ to donate their work for display at the festival. The music subcommittee had extensive discussions over whether to send ‘entirely and only traditional music’ to Lagos or whether to include music with Western elements. That debate obliged committee members to ask ‘Did we ever have harmony in our music at all? What is the real difference between traditional music and Western music?’ The committee’s minutes report that ‘No final and satisfying conclusion was reached’ to that debate.

All of this organizational work made stern demands on the festival’s Ugandan organizers. Here, as in the domain of cultural work more generally, there was a pressing need for historical materials, for objects that could testify to Ugandans’ initiative, artistry, and creativity. The visual arts subcommittee had counted on a budget of Ush. 400,000, with which it planned to purchase Uganda’s ‘best and most outstanding artistic treasures’ from museums in Britain and Europe. At the last minute the budget was reduced to Ush. 10,000, and the committee was obliged to dramatically scale down its plans. The art show planned for Lugogo Stadium had to be overhauled in haste. The committee had planned to erect partitions on the football pitch where the art could be hung for display. In the end the art had to be placed on tables for viewing. The chair of the committee commandeered a vehicle and drove from one end of Uganda to the other, collecting some 200 art objects for display. For two weeks he spent his nights in the stadium, working to organize the display. The committee responsible for organizing Uganda’s contribution to ‘Celebrity Day’ at the Lagos festival was likewise obliged to scramble for material. The committee wrote to district culture officers in 1973, asking them to send in the names of people who had advanced ‘African Art and Culture’.

By December 1974, having received only a few nominations, the committee was sending out radio announcements asking

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46 KabaleDA Community Development 21, ‘Cultural Activities’ file: Mrs. Dungu to all Community Development Assistants, 2 April 1974.
47 KabaleDA Community Development 17, ‘Festivals and Competition’ file: Uganda National Steering Committee meeting, 6 December 1974.
the public to send in names of eminent and historically significant people. In the end, the members of the National Steering Committee themselves drafted a list of celebrities for transmission to the Lagos festival.

In faraway Kigezi culture officer Tumusiime saw himself as an active participant in all of this activity. The chair of Uganda’s pottery committee had visited Kigezi in 1974, collecting two pots for display in Lagos. The following year Tumusiime sent along four additional pots for inclusion in FESTAC: among them was a small one, traditionally used for washing; a large one used for storing butter; and a curved one used for feminine hygiene. He was careful to include the vernacular names for each of the pots. He was likewise helpful to the anxious committee preparing the list of Ugandan celebrities. In January 1974 he prepared biographies of four eminent men of Kigezi and sent it to Uganda’s principal culture officer. First on his list was Makobore, ruler of the ancient kingdom of Rujumbura. Tumusiime took care to dwell on the size of his person—he was six feet tall and ‘possessed the gigantic size that rendered him immobile’. Even so, wrote Tumusiime, he was ‘kind, liberal and just. He helped all in need and punished wrongdoers…. He was gifted and knew how to rule’. There was no evidence offered to support these boilerplate characterizations, no footnotes to published literature, no interview material. Tumusiime’s characterization of the magnanimous Makobore was a work of imagination, configured to conform with the expectations that the Lagos organizers had imposed.

In his excellent book on FESTAC, Andrew Apter shows that the festival offered Nigeria’s government a vehicle by which to constitute a transnational black culture. It remapped the African diaspora, Apter writes, producing a ‘Nigerian vision of the black and African world’. John Tumusiime’s files show us that FESTAC had a wider itinerary than that. Here, in a remote corner of southern Uganda, Tumusiime found in the FESTAC conference a means of organizing and authenticating a local project of cultural recovery. Here was a source of funding

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51KabaleDA Community Development 17, ‘Festivals and Competition’ file: Tumusiime to Chair, Pottery Subcommittee, 17 November 1975.
52KabaleDA Community Development 17, ‘Festivals and Competition’ file: Tumusiime to Principal Culture Officer, 26 January 1974.
by which to buttress and extend projects that were already underway. Here, too, was a font of inspiration that could shape a vocation.

Tumusiime pursued his work on behalf of FESTAC alongside the wider program of activity in which he was engaged as Kigezi’s district culture officer. He took up his post on 15 June 1972. The first report he filed had on its cover a hand-drawn picture of a drum, with three people crowding round to play it. The report vibrated with ideas and energy. Within the space of a few weeks Tumusiime had organized committees in each of the district’s subcounties, through which elders and citizens could ‘assist and advise...on how best [to] preserve, promote, and develop the Culture of the people in this District’. There was a new society of blacksmiths, dedicated to making traditional knives and spears. There was a committee working on local history and folklore. There were 26 dance troupes in the district. Tumusiime welcomed the Amin government’s decision to ban miniskirts for Ugandan women, claiming that short dresses were a contradiction of people’s culture...because traditionally a woman had to dress completely and even her ankles were not to be seen. So this good move restored the moral [sic] and culture of the people.

Tumusiime’s assessment of Kiga women’s traditional attire was historically inaccurate, inattentive to the changing styles in which the region’s women attired themselves. But accuracy was not his concern. Tumusiime felt himself empowered—by virtue of his position—to speak as an authority on Kiga affairs, to distinguish traditions from innovations. He lamented the unpopularity of Kiga traditional food, for the ‘educated class tend to be interested in foreign dishes like Italian soup, HOT DOG etc. and they neglect and despise our traditional dishes like Oburo, Amasaza etc.’ By early July, only three weeks after his arrival in the district, Tumusiime was busily organizing a district festival to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Ugandan independence. He planned to feature a fashion show, with ‘traditional dressing of all four ethnic groups in Kigezi’. Here there would be no miniskirts or hot dogs. Instead, the central act of the show was to feature a ‘traditional homestead’, to be built of reeds, poles, grass, and traditional furniture.

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Even as he pursued all of this culture work, John Tumusiime and other Ugandan district culture officers had always to struggle against the shortfalls of funding, infrastructure, and material. Tumusiime’s office lacked furniture. There was no stationery, and even the paper on which his report was printed had been borrowed from other offices. The district culture festival in 1976—which Tumusiime organized—was nearly scuppered due to lack of transport. Two days before the festival was to begin, Tumusiime was writing to Kigezi’s district commissioner asking for the use of a lorry that could carry ‘people, handicrafts, traditional dishes and brews from the subcounties’ to the site of the festival. Likewise the 1977 culture festival in Busoga, in eastern Uganda, survived despite what the district culture officer called ‘the tidal wave of anti-feelings’ that had nearly undermined it. The dance teams and the theatrical troupes that had planned to participate could not travel due to lack of motor transport, and by 11:00 a.m. on the day of the festival only two dance teams had arrived to perform. In desperation the culture officer was obliged to requisition a dump truck and a school bus to drive round his district, collecting dancers and actors for the show.

In Amin’s Uganda there was an acute tension between the idealism of culture workers such as John Tumusiime and the constraints of a collapsing economy. This tension was particularly apparent in Tumusiime’s effort to improve a site in Kisoro, some miles from Kabale town, where the district’s first headquarters had once sat. The place had been marked with a metal plaque in 1957, which identified the site as the ‘first headquarters of Kigezi District’. In November 1972 President Amin celebrated Remembrance Day on the spot. Twelve cabinet ministers and most of the diplomatic heads of mission were in attendance. The British high commissioner reported that it was a riotous occasion: Amin had appeared at the hotel in Kabale at 11:30 p.m. the night before the ceremony, and he, his ministers, and a few diplomats had danced to the music of an army band until 3:30 a.m. The next morning they had made the trip to Kisoro, some miles outside Kabale town, and at 11:00 a.m. they had sung ‘Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past’ as a flag was lowered and wreathes were laid.

59BNA FCO 31/1234: Harry Brind to East Africa Department, 13 November 1972.
On that very occasion Amin had told the assembled diplomatic corps that the last battle of World War I had been fought at the place, and he promised to ‘maintain and develop’ the monument at the site. There was nothing in the monumental architecture on the site that identified it with world historical events. But for John Tumusiime, Amin’s offhand comment was the starting place for a memorial project. A few days after the Remembrance Day ceremonies he wrote to the conservator of antiquities to elaborate on Amin’s story. He claimed that

After World War I had ended, and even trities [sic] to end the war signed, the British Legion and the German Battalion continued fighting on this place. So the last blood to be shed in this war and the last shot to be fired was done on this place two years after the end of the war had ended. This was due to the lack of Communication for the Forces here never knew that the war had ended. Even today one can see big pits where Soldiers used to take cover during the fighting.⁶⁰

Tumusiime’s account of history bore a marginal relationship with the truth. He was right about the uneven timing of the war’s end: the German army in east Africa had continued to fight until 25 November 1918, two weeks after the signing of the armistice that ended World War I. But that army was in South Rhodesia, not Uganda, when the war ended. Tumusiime’s reconstruction of events in Kigezi was inaccurate. But it was good marketing. Tumusiime asked the conservator of antiquities for funding to erect a ‘traditional house’ on the site, ‘so that the place is given its full splendour’. He asked also for funds to recruit a porter to care for the site.

There followed protracted negotiations over the logistics for erecting a traditional house. As it turned out, traditional building routines were expensive and difficult to organize. The conservator authorized the allocation of funding within a few weeks of receiving Tumusiime’s letter. By April 1973 a porter had been hired, the site had been demarcated, and the memorial had been gazetted in Ugandan law. But the bamboo poles needed to erect a house that looked traditional were hard to find: the nearest bamboo forest was five miles away, and a truck was needed to get the bamboo moved to Kisoro.⁶¹ By April 1974 the four workers who had been employed to build the traditional house were on strike, demanding payment of Ush. 1,200 before they would commence work. And they asked again for the use of a vehicle to transport the

bamboo poles to the site.\textsuperscript{62} By October that year the house had finally been erected, and John Tumusiime reported that it was ‘beautiful’. But it was unroofed, because the thatching grass needed to cover the building was located a considerable distance away.\textsuperscript{63} In May 1975 Tumusiime reported that thatching grass had been cut on four separate occasions, but it had never been moved to the Kisoro memorial for lack of transport, and in consequence the grass had rotted.\textsuperscript{64} In December 1975 Tumusiime asked the district commissioner to impose forced labor on the residents of the place, for the bamboo frame was rotting due to its exposure to the rain. By April 1976 the thatching was, finally, under way. The work was done by the residents of Nyakabande during the once-per-week communal labor in which they were forced to engage. It took three months to finish the job.\textsuperscript{65}

Only a very few people ever saw the memorial that John Tumusiime had worked to build. In 1974 there were 60 visitors; in 1975 there were 6; and in 1978 there were 21.\textsuperscript{66} In 1979, during the Tanzanian invasion that toppled Idi Amin, the monument was damaged by gunfire. The bamboo house was demolished, and the caretaker of the site brought the metal plaque to the subcounty chief’s headquarters for safekeeping.\textsuperscript{67} By 1980, the year following Amin’s overthrow, farmers were cultivating the plot on which the monument sat without regard to the boundaries that Tumusiime had erected. In 1986, when the National Resistance Movement came to power, it fell to a new culture officer—a man named Baryayebwa—to write to government authorities to ask for funding to rebuild the monument. ‘After the First World War the British and the German battalion continued fighting at this place, so that the last shot to be fired took place two years after the war had ended’, he wrote. He was cribbing from the petition that his predecessor, John Tumusiime, had composed some 15 years before.\textsuperscript{68} It had been filed in the district’s archives.

\textsuperscript{62}KabaleDA Public Works 23, ‘Monuments’ file: Subcounty chief Nyakabande to District Culture Officer, 4 April 1974.
\textsuperscript{64}KabaleDA Public Works 23, ‘Monuments’ file: Tumusiime to Conservator of Antiquities, 6 May 1975.
\textsuperscript{65}KabaleDA Public Works 23, ‘Monuments’ file: Community Development Assistant to Culture Officer, 14 April 1976.
\textsuperscript{67}KabaleDA Public Works 23, ‘Monuments’ file: Subcounty chief Nyakabande to Culture Officer, Kabale, 3 October 1980.
The history of the Kigezi monument is instructive in a number of registers. It tells us that lieux de mémoire are actively made, not simply preserved or handed down from the past. It tells us that the narratives that make sites of memory meaningful can be borrowed, plagiarized, and pinned onto sites that actually have nothing to do with their purported meaning. What I want to stress here, though, about John Tumusiime’s vexed efforts to erect a monument to the end of World War I in southern Uganda is this: conservation is hard work. There is labor involved in the making of myths. It needs concrete, wire, bamboo, thatch, and human sweat.

The labor of monument-making is an effort to cheat time of its spoils. It entails the freezing of space, its enclosure, its separation from the ordinary uses of things. All of it takes maintenance. That brings me to a second project that John Tumusiime pursued over the course of his career as Kigezi’s culture officer: the building of the Kigezi District Museum. Kigezi’s ’Culture Committee’ had passed a resolution calling for the building of a museum in 1973. The aim, wrote Tumusiime in a letter to the Uganda Museum’s curator, was to ‘collect our traditional ornaments, the early black smithing, some sculptures and other ancient and traditional skills’. The Kabale town council agreed to allocate a building on 14/15 Ruchiro Road to house the new museum. The building had formerly been Kabale’s Hindu temple, seized by the ‘Departed Asians Property Committee’ after the expulsion of Uganda’s Indian community in 1972. Within a few months of the Indians’ departure the building had fallen into dereliction: the doors, the locks, and the electricity meters had been stolen, and many of the windowpanes had disappeared. In 1976, when John Tumusiime developed a plan for the rehabilitation of 14/15 Ruchiro Road, he estimated that it would take 60 tons of cement to rebuild the structure’s floor. He hoped to put a craft shop on the right side of the museum, a lecture hall near the front, and a showcase at the center in which a diorama was to be positioned. And he asked also for money to employ a watchman to guard the premises. But by 1977, when a new culture officer took over Kigezi District, the museum was again in disarray: it had been looted twice in the previous year. Thieves had taken away 36 window panes, two padlocks, one office desk, and all of the boards

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71 KabaleDA Public Works 24, ‘Kigezi District Museum’ file: Tumusiime to Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Culture and Community Development, 18 February 1976.
that had lined the showcases. The watchman who was supposed to protect the property had absconded from duty, as he had not been paid for eight months.

The museum was finally opened to the public in July 1978. There were two dance troupes in attendance, and the culture officer was keen to ensure that they made a good impression. ‘They should look very smart and should not come smelling like alcohol’, he told their local chief. But by 1980—after the fall of the Amin government and the departure of Tumusiime from the district—the museum had again fallen into disrepair. The new culture officer reported that the lock for the main door was out of order, the photographs displayed in the museum’s halls had faded with time, and the paint needed renewing. The officer had to use his own money to repair the lock. There were 6,614 visitors in the first half of 1982, after Milton Obote returned to power. The culture officer pointed out the urgent need for a latrine to accommodate the many people visiting the place. By 1990, the museum had again become derelict. The absence of toilets meant that the place ‘smell of urine and feces is found outside the building’, wrote the caretaker. Thirty window panes were missing. Ants had invaded the displays, consuming several of the exhibits. The roof leaked and needed repair. The signpost had fallen down. And children were making a habit of playing on the grounds, while nearby householders grazed their cattle on the premises. In 2007 the museum was permanently closed, as Indians returning to Uganda had reposessed the building and refounded their temple.

Here, then, were two heritage institutions—the monument and the museum—that were lost to posterity. Seen from the vantage point of preservationists, the story of the Kabale Museum, like the story of the monument of Kisoro, is a story of loss, of failure, of forgotten history. For us, as scholars, the interesting questions here are to do with impermanence itself, with the transitory nature of memorial sites, and with the speeding pace of decrepitude during the 1970s. The infrastructure of heritage conservation in Idi Amin’s Uganda was constrained by

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73KabaleDA Community Development 17, ‘Museums’ file: John Tiina-Kagunda to county chief, Ndorwa, 3 July 1978.
74KabaleDA Community Development 17, ‘Museums’ file: H. Baryayebwa to Curator, Uganda Museum, 6 November 1980.
76KabaleDA Community Development 17, ‘Museums’ file: Caretaker, Kabale Museum, to Culture Officer, Kabale, 18 June 1990.
shortage and lack: by the absence of petrol to fuel vehicles, by the absence of paper, by shortages of glass and concrete, by deficits in government payroll. All of these shortfalls made the work of repair and maintenance more difficult and vexing, more demanding of time, human ingenuity and commitment. That is why John Tumusiime’s career as Kigezi’s culture officer is worth studying. He was not particularly successful in his work, and neither did the institutions he built outlast his tenure in office. But his commitment helps us understand that, for some men of the front line, idealism attended Idi Amin’s war of cultural and political self-assertion.