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## Review

# Nationalism, popular uprising and the un-doing of martial race concept in Uganda, 1971 to 1986

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When, on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1979, newly installed President of Uganda Professor Yusufu Lule, announced plans to reform recruitment into the armed forces to reflect the ethnic composition of the country, he was ousted by the army the next day. His successor, Godfrey Lukongwa Binaisa, made a similar mistake and attempted to end the hegemony of northerners in the military, by removing army Chief of Staff Brigadier Oyite Ojok. He also suffered a coup. The lesson Ugandans learned was that the century old military ethnocracy in the country could not be ended by a mere stroke of the pen. It required a protracted people's struggle, which explains why Yoweri Museveni succeeded in 1986 where Lule and Binaisa had failed in 1979 and 1980 respectively. This paper illustrates the growth and metamorphosis of a military ethnocracy in Uganda, and how it was defeated through a popular people's resistance.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Military, Ethnocracy, Bantu, Nilotics, Acholi

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The different communities that British colonial forces amalgamated to form Uganda were of three different ethno-linguistic groups namely the Sudanic, Nilotics and Bantu (Lwanga-Lunyigo, 1987: 2). The southern half of the country had Bantu communities while the north composed of Nilotics and Sudanic societies who were closer in affinity to the peoples across the border in Sudan than the Bantu societies of the south with whom they were combined. This amalgamation was done by way of military expeditions and repressions. The military remained a key factor in the politics of Uganda before, during and after British colonialism. In this exceptional military history, the Acholi became the 'martial race' of Uganda. The colonial army as recorded by Brett (1995: 135) was recruited from northern tribes using physical rather than educational criteria. It expanded rapidly after 1962, but the rank-and-file continued to come predominantly from Acholi.

Martial race was a designation created by army officials of British India after the mutiny of 1857, where they classified each ethnic group into one of two categories, 'martial' and 'non-martial'. The ostensible reason was that a 'martial race' was typically brave and well-built for fighting while the 'non-martial races' were those whom the British believed to be unfit for battle because of their sedentary lifestyle (Gavin, 2006: 1–20). The British regarded the 'martial races' as valiant and strong but intellectually inferior, lacking the initiative or leadership qualities to command large military formations. They were also regarded as politically subservient or docile to authority. The British came to East Africa using the same colonial tactics they had perfected throughout their empire: consolidating power through divide-and-rule policies that irrevocably changed identity, politics and belonging in the territory now known as Uganda (Finnstrom, 2003: 62). "Every institution touched by the

hand of the colonial state”, wrote Mahmoud Mandani (1984: 10), “was given a pronounced regional or nationality character. It became a truism that a soldier must be a northerner, a civil servant a southerner and a merchant an Asian”. This policy meant that, with time, soldiering in Uganda became a preserve of the northern ethnic communities especially the Acholi.

A British Protectorate over Uganda was formally proclaimed on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1894. In a dispatch to the colonial office in London dated 4<sup>th</sup> December 1894 Colonel Colville made recommendations for the formation of Uganda Rifles. In September 1895 the Uganda Rifles Ordinance was approved by Parliament (Uganda Rifle Ordinance: FO2/176). The man chosen for the task of building the Uganda Rifles was Major Ternan who had distinguished himself in service in Egypt. He arrived in Uganda late in 1895 and the following year was appointed commandant of Uganda Rifles. The core of Uganda Rifles was the Nubian force of Emin Pasha, Governor of Equatorial Province, who was cut off from Egypt by the Mahadist revolt of 1881 to 1885 (Holger, 1991: 562). After he was rescued by H. M. Stanley in 1889, his army was absorbed into the British colonial service by Captain F. D. Lugard. When Nubian forces mutinied in 1897, the British began to sideline them in preference for the Acholi who then dominated the military terrains of Uganda until the coup of Idi Amin of 1971, momentarily, halted their hegemony.

In April 1979, Tanzanian army assisted by Ugandan nationalist forces based in exile, ousted Idi Amin. Yusufu Lule was made President. He was of the Buganda, and therefore Bantu, ethnic stock, yet the army to which he was commander in chief was dominated by Nilotics. There was intense power struggle between the two major Ugandan groups involved in the ouster of Amin-Fronasa and Kikosi Maluum. At liberation the former was much the larger force, when Museveni was made Minister of Defense. However, Tito Okello and Oyite Ojok were given command of the unified Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF), Front for National Salvation (Fronasa) officers and men were sidelined, and new recruitment was confined to traditional northern areas (Brett, 1995: 141).

On June 20, 1979, the army staged a coup, removing Lule as president for allegedly making wide ranging appointments in government without consulting the military high command. But, according to Mutiibwa (1992: 130),

*Lule was removed from power in 1979 mainly because of an attempt to shift the ethnic composition of the army away from the Acholi. The unfortunate Lule had talked about what kind of army Uganda should have. He had mentioned basic academic and literacy requirements; he had stressed the importance of recruitment policies which took into account the nationalities*

*profile. In daring to shape the new Ugandan army, the vital constituency, he was inadvertently trying to cut some raw nerves and it is because he dared talk about the future of Uganda army that Lule was actually overthrown. The other reasons were a mere smoke-screen.*

Lule’s proposal to disband the National Liberation Army to replace it with a newly-created National Army was viewed as a malicious move to sideline those who formed the bulk of the liberation force.

Prof. Edward Rugumayo was elected to replace Lule. However, Rugumayo’s election sparked off massive riots in Buganda with chants of ‘No Lule, No work’. To win Buganda’s support, another Muganda, Godfrey Lukongwe Binaisa, was called to replace Prof. Rugumayo (Mutiibwa, 1992: 132). Binaisa’s plans to reform recruitment into the armed forces were also seen as undermining the army. It was also viewed as a threat to the dominance of the so-called traditional areas for army recruits such as Acholi and Lango (Mutiibwa, 1992: 135). When Binaisa removed the army Chief of Staff, Brigadier Oyite Ojok, he was himself removed from office on 12 May 1980 by the Military Commission, a powerful organ of the UNLF. The country was then led by the Presidential Commission (set up a few days after the coup) with among others Paulo Muwanga, Yoweri Museveni, Oyite Ojok and Tito Okello as commissioners.

The Presidential Commission organised the disputed elections of December 1980 in which Uganda People’s Congress (UPC) of Milton Obote emerged winner. Brett (1995:129-130) has argued that government by consent is impossible where force is not subjected to civil authority or is divided between warring factions. Once autocratic power exists, opponents will be eliminated or compelled to take up arms, and people will have to choose between submission to arbitrary authority or a ‘war of all against all’. Early in 1981, Yoweri Museveni took to the bush to build a protracted peoples war against Obote’s government and the involvement of the army in politics. In January 1986, his forces marched triumphantly into Kampala city.

In the opinion of Oloka-Onyango, (2004: 30):

*The notion that the period from mid 1980s and mid 1990s generated a new breed of African leadership captured popular imagination, official discourse, and academic writing. Leaders like Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, Isias Aferworki in Eritrea and Paul Kagame in Rwanda were young, dynamic and willing to break discredited predecessors’ taboos. Among these bretheren, no personality better exemplified the new breed than Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, President of Uganda. When the National Resistance’s Movement/Army (NRM/A) assumed power in the wake of Uganda’s second civil war in the 1980s,*

*the leadership of the movement very quickly assumed an almost Guevaran posture in the discourse on African democratization and recovery. Nearly two decades, Museveni still dominates Uganda's popular and intellectual imagination.*

The war in the Luwero Triangle is one of the forgotten wars. In the bipolar world order of the 1980s, Uganda possessed no particular strategic importance. As a consequence, the political and military involvement of foreign powers was minor. Significantly less has been written about this war than other wars of Africa, for example the Mau Mau in Kenya in the 1950s, the civil war in Nigeria in the 1960s or the war in Zimbabwe in the 1970s. There are hardly any published texts examining the war in detail (Schubert, 2006: 96). Indeed, when I googled National Resistance Army, I was led to the Lord's Resistance Army. Considering what the two organizations stand for, it was amazing to find that more has been written about the latter than the former. This paper highlights the struggle by nationalist forces against dictatorship and an oppressive military ethnocracy in Uganda. The war was conducted in two phases, first to remove Idi Amin and second, to get rid of Obote and Tito Okello regimes.

### **The growth of Military Ethnocracy in Uganda**

"On recruiting safaris we went for the chaps who were tough and strong and ran quicker than anyone else. It was a terrible mistake". Those were words of Major Iain Grahame, a British officer serving with the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the King's African Rifles in Uganda as reported by Hugh (1983: 44). In this section, I will illustrate the historical circumstances under military ethnocracy and the martial race concept of the ethnic communities of northern Uganda, especially the Acholi, emerged and metamorphosed.

The Nubian soldiers, already mentioned, who formed the core of Uganda Rifles were of different ethnic background from the societies of northern Uganda and southern Sudan. They included the Alur, Acholi, Kakwa, Lughbara, Bari and all those communities in whose areas Khartoumers slave traders had operated. The Nubians were actually slave soldiers who changed hands from the *Jaddhiya* slave dealers to the Egyptian government and finally to the British colonial government as discussed by Zubairi and Doka (1992: 197). From about 1897 the British dropped Nubians as the preferred race for military service for reasons already explained. This paved way for Acholi supremacy in the colonial military. When independence was attained in 1962, the pattern continued. "The Ugandan Army", writes Mahmood Mandani, (1983: 62), "was a child of the colonial King's African Rifles: the same men, the same discipline, the

same orientation, the same weapons, only different uniforms". According to Ruddy Doom and Koen Vlassenroot (1999: 5-36), the Acholi, far from being born warriors, were transformed into a military ethnocracy. Their opinions differ from that of Grove (1919: 163) who states that the Acholi were already a fighting race and war was their constant occupation before the government took over their country and it usually took the form of night raids on other villages.

It was due to the above that the British colonialists called northern Uganda "the Nile Military District", "In June 1899", writes Delme-Radcliffe (1905: 482), "when at Mumias in Kavirondo, I received orders to proceed to the Nile Province or Nile Military District, as it was then called, to take over the civil and military charge from Colonel Martyr, who had returned after having established stations at Wadelei, Lamogi, Aduffu and Fort Berkerley".

Lwanga-Lunyigo (1987: 10) argues that what endeared the British to the northerners in general was their remoteness from the center of the country, their relative lack of trappings of western civilization and their rather single political and military organizational backgrounds. If the British used these yardsticks, the Pygmies of Bundibugyo District would have been the most preferred for the colonial military service. The more accurate explanation is that the British preferred the Acholi due to their physique and the positive remarks made about them by early European explorers and administrators in their territory.

According to Karugire (1996: 33),

*The bulk of the Protectorates armed services were recruited from Northern Uganda, particularly Acholi, Lango and West Nile in that order of numerical representation. This became the established order throughout the colonial period, and as we shall see, for a long period afterwards. And it was not long before the colonial government invented a rationalization for building this ethnically unbalanced army: the people of northern Uganda were the 'martial tribes' of the Protectorate, and since the African soldiers required in the colonial army were those of strong physique, stamina, speed of reaction and upright bearing, the answer was tailor made: recruit from northern Uganda.*

During Uganda's colonial period, the British encouraged political and economic development in the south of the country, in particular among the Baganda. In contrast, the Acholi and other northern ethnic communities supplied much of the national manual labor and came to comprise a majority of the military, creating a military ethnocracy. Recruitment concentrated mainly in the labor reserves. But even within the labor reserves the British were still selective. In the opinion of Girling (1960:

179), the Acholi were favored because "Their superior physique, habits of discipline, and unsophisticated outlook, command them to employers dealing with a labor force and population where political agitation and petty dishonesty is common".

Again we are told;

*As an ethnic community, the Acholi and other northern tribes of Uganda had produced a disproportionate number of tall people. Since recruitment into the Ugandan armed forces gave preference to candidates who were 5' 8" or over, the northern communities, especially the Acholi, had an edge (Girling, 1960: 179).*

Having spent many months at Patiko which he called "Fatiko", Baker, (1874: 93-94) wrote, "The men of Shooli and Fatiko are the best proportioned that I have ever seen; without the extreme height of the Shilluks or Dinkas, they are muscular and well knit, and generally their faces are handsome". Note that by the time Sir Samuel Baker traversed Acholi-land, the name Acholi did not exist. The people were called Shooli which was a misnomer of Shilluk whom the Arab slave traders knew so well. Sir Samuel Baker's impression of the Banyoro whom he visited after his sojourn in Patiko and Payira, relative to the Acholi, was very revealing:

*The natives of Unyoro are very inferior in physique to the Fatiko. This is the result of vegetable food without either cereals or flesh... the food of the people from infancy, after their mothers' milk has ceased, is restricted to plantains and the watery sweet potatoes... the men generally exhibit a want of muscle, and are troubled with coetaneous diseases (Baker, 1874: 150).*

Lt. Col. Delme-Radcliffe, whom the Acholi name 'Langalanga', gave the following impression:

*The largest tribe of the region in extent of distribution is the Acholi, which covers the greater part of the country between the Lutoka Mountains and the Victoria Nile. They extend westwards and gradually merge into the Lango and Karimojong...they are a fine tall well-built race and they live in open villages as a rule. Their young men are generally very smartly turned out wearing brightly polished metal rings on their lower arms and legs...they keep their weapons in good order, and always keep themselves very clean and well oiled (Delme-Radcliffe, 1905: 486).*

In 1909 when the British authorities decided to transfer the Acholi capital from Koba, on the bank of the Albertine

Nile, to Gulu, the Assistant District Commissioner in charge wrote to the District Commissioner, Nile Province, requesting that only the Acholi be relocated to Gulu because they were hard working. This letter has been kept. In part, it reads as follows:

*It is not in my opinion policy to allow any of the Nubians and Lendu to come here (Gulu) from Koba; the former are lazy useless members of the community and will not work, the latter are an inferior tribe, both fabricate native liquor for the purpose of sale (Gulu District Archives, A 46/ 351/ Opening of Gulu District Station).*

The same letter ends with the following appeal:

*Every endeavour has to be made... to administer this healthy and fertile country inhabited by a fine intelligent race, keen on acquiring knowledge, and anxious to share the benefits that accrue to those under our protection.*

In my opinion, it was such accolades as above that endeared the British to the Acholi making them become the chosen race especially for the armed forces.

Having zeroed on the Acholi and other northern communities as the most suitable for the military, the British then began to build an army that could serve their interest. According to Ali Mazrui (1975: 13), "The Acholi constituted the largest single group within the armed forces of Uganda, although they were clearly one of the smaller groups in the total population of Uganda. Between a third and a half of the Ugandan army consisted of the Acholi".

The creation of a martial race was not unique to the Acholi or Uganda. In Kenya after confidently describing the Kamba serving in the KAR as "loyal soldiers of the Queen" during the Mau-Mau Emergency, a press release by the East African Command went on to characterize the Kamba as a "fighting race". These sentiments were echoed by other colonial observers in the early 1950s who described the Kamba as hardy, virile, courageous and mechanically minded tribe. Considered by many officers to be the "best soldierly material in Africa", the Kamba supplied the KAR with soldiers at a rate that was three to four times their percentage of the overall Kenyan population. Interestingly enough, many Kamba appeared to embrace the British assertion that they were a martial race (Parsons, 1999: 672).

In Nyasaland (Now Malawi) the British created the Yao as the Martial race as opposed to the Ngoni and the Tonga who were larger in population and clearly better organized politically. The Yao depended on long distance trade of ivory and slaves, their land was dry, they were forced by natural circumstances into the KAR as disused by Marjoma (2003: 414). When slave trade was abolished, the Yao were compelled to enlist in the KAR

because that was the only available option to earn a living in the changed economic systems.

Like the Yao and the Kamba, the Acholi occupy a dry land densely populated by wild animals making hunting another major economic activity. Again, like the Yao and the Kamba, the Acholi had suffered terribly from slave trade. The experience of hunting and confronting heavily armed slave raiders seemed to have had an impact on the zeal for military service. "When recruitment to the Kings African Rifles began", wrote Postlethwaite (1947: 23), "The Acholi took to soldiering like ducks to water". By this time, the Acholi themselves appeared to have been convinced that they were the martial race of Uganda. Their most celebrated poet, Okot pa Bitek, (1966) put it this way:

Do you know  
Why the knees  
Of millet - eaters  
Are tough?  
Tougher than the knees  
Of those who drink bananas!  
Where do you think  
The stone powder  
From the grinding stones goes?

The Acholi are millet eaters who generally believe that the Bantu communities whose staple food is bananas or milk are physically weak people.

At independence there were political and ethnic conflicts, a semi-federal constitution, and a Prime Minister mainly supported by northern groups and resented by southern establishment that had little respect for the people who lived across the Nile (Brett, 1995: 134-135). In 1964 the soldiers mutinied, demanding better pay, conditions and Africanisation of the officer corps. The uprising was put down with British support, but those involved were reinstated, and junior officers - all former NCOs - were rapidly promoted. Hence a northern group with limited education was now able to exert an important influence over national politics. The army grew from a single battalion of 700 strong in 1962 to nearly 7000 by 1969 (Otonnu, 1987: 51)

By the end of 1965 a group of southern ministers led by Grace Ibingira were building links in Buganda in order to remove Obote. After being accused in early 1966 of colluding with Amin to smuggle stolen gold and ivory from Zaire into Uganda, Obote responded by arresting five ministers and replacing Shaban Opolot by Amin as Army Commander. He then repealed the constitution, abrogated the autonomy of Buganda, and finally ordered the army to attack the Kabaka's palace, forcing him to flee. Elections were cancelled, and the unitary constitution was rubber-stamped by Parliament in 1967, with Obote as President. He had thus used force to get what he wanted, thereby giving the army a central political role (Brett, 1995: 135). Northern Uganda's and particularly Acholi hegemony was entrenched. Although Idi Amin overturned it in 1971, it was just a hiccup which

ended in 1979. The Acholi military supremacy blossomed again in April 1979 when Idi Amin was removed from power. This military ethnocracy reached its height with the coup d'état of 1985 led by Acholi Generals, Tito Okello Lutwa and Bazilio Olara Okello, and came to a crashing end with the defeat of their Military Junta by the National Resistance Army led by now-president Yoweri Museveni.

### The War against Idi Amin's Dictatorship

Here, I will show how Dictator Idi Amin Dada was removed from power and how his ouster marked the beginning of the demise of military ethnocracy and the claim of martial race in Uganda. The roots of the NRA can be traced to the liberation war against military dictator Idi Amin Dada. Political opposition to Amin took two forms: factions in the army making periodic assassination attempts, and exile groups operating mainly out of Tanzania and Kenya. At the Moshi Conference of March, 1979 in which the plan to oust Amin was hatched, three armed wings of the anti-Amin nationalist movements had been formed. The first was called Kikoosi Maluum headed by Tito Okello and David Oyite Ojok. The others were Front for National Salvation (FRONASA) led by Yoweri Museveni and Save Uganda Movement (SUM) under Akena P' Ojok and Ateker Ejalu. All were divided on ethnic or ideological grounds. Kikosi Maluum supported a conventional war strategy, while FRONASA and SUM were preparing for a guerrilla struggle by infiltrating trained sympathizers into Uganda as argued by Brett (1995: 140)

FRONASA was the most ideologically focused group of the three fighting Idi Amin alongside the Tanzanian People's Defense Forces. This was due to the earlier contact and training that the FRONASA leader, Yoweri Museveni, had received in Mozambique. In September 1968, during his second year at the university, he arranged to visit safe zones under FRELIMO's control with a few fellow students (Museveni, 1997: 30). While in exile between 1971 and 1978, he recruited and sent to Mozambique 30 cadres to train in guerrilla warfare (Katumba, 2000: 161).

At the University of Dar es Salam in Tanzania, Museveni studied under Walter Rodney, became an unreconstructed Marxist, and set up an organization called the University Students' African Revolutionary Front (USARF). He received the rudiments of guerrilla training and combat in Samora Machel's FRELIMO in Mozambique in the late 1960s. He returned to college to write his senior thesis on the applicability of Franz Fanon's revolutionary violence to post-colonial Africa having seen the theory applied in practice (Oloka Onyango 2004: 35).

Museveni was inspired by Stokely Carmichael, a Trinidadian-American black activist in the 1960's

American Civil rights Movement, and admired the late Samora Machel leader of *Frente de Libertacao de Mozambique* (FRELIMO) who provided him and a few others like Fred Rwegyema and Salim Saleh (Museveni's brother) their initial military training specializing in guerrilla warfare (Katumba 2000: 160).

Ever with an eye on liberation through protracted means, Mr. Museveni had started organising people to resist dictatorship when he was still at High School. Kasfir (2005: 275) writes:

*Museveni has said that he adopted the idea of armed resistance in 1966 while doing his A-levels at Ntare School, in reaction to President Milton Obote's dictatorial practices in overthrowing the Ugandan Constitution. Museveni's decision to attend the University of Dar-es-salaam rather than the more prestigious Makerere in Kampala reflected his early interest in progressive ideas. It also gave him opportunity to meet Eduardo Mondlane, the president of FRELIMO, whose headquarters were located there, and learn the techniques of fighting an organized government. He helped start a radical discussion circle at the university.*

When Museveni graduated from university, he first worked as a secretary to the president during the first Milton Obote regime before Idi Amin overthrew it in 1971 (Katumba 2000: 161). The formation of FRONASA to prepare for a guerrilla war was a direct response to Idi Amin's seizure of power in 1971 and to Museveni's disagreement over strategy with Milton Obote. FRONASA originally consisted of Museveni and the small cohort who had gone to secondary school with him and others who had joined his political discussion group at university.

At the Moshi conference of March 1979, all Ugandan nationalist groups opposed to Idi Amin were invited. Some of the organizations were militarist while some were civil. There was the Zambian group, Kenyan group, London group, Tanzanian group etc. The majority of the nationalist groups were based in Tanzania. According to Balam (1996: 97), there was intense lobbying between the two main fighting groups Kikoosi Malum (special unit) and Front for National Salvation (Fronasa). Each of the two wanted to be recognized as the major nationalist fighting group against Idi Amin.

Three axes were created in the war against Idi Amin: The Western Axis taken by FRONASA was to march from Tanzania to Mbarara, Kasese and West Nile. Kikoosi Malum took the Central Axis from Mutukula to Masaka and Kampala. The third was to travel by air and through Lake Victoria, take Entebbe Airport, then move on to Kampala. There was no instruction to recruit civilians on the way because of lack of time for training however when Museveni reached Uganda, sentiments of nationalism forced him to embark on a massive

recruitment drive. Adupa (1993:177-178) reports that:

*While by December 1978 Museveni's initial force comprised 28 guerrillas and the SUM group led by Akena p' Ojok was composed of 100 men, the capture of Mbarara in February 1979 had contributed to new recruitment drive by Museveni's FRONASA which swelled its initial strength to 5000 men almost all from Mbarara district... such recruitment suggested that the UNLA was a conglomeration of partisan forces whose ultimate allegiance was fragmented, ethnic and personalized*

Throughout their march from Kagera border point to Mutukula, Lukaya, Entebbe and Kampala, Tito Okello and Oyite Ojok, commanders of Kikoosi Malum, never recruited anybody. They apparently wanted to recruit entirely from northern Uganda as reported by Mugisha (2007: 2). By the time Kampala fell on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1979, Kikoosi Malum was a much smaller force than Fronasa. However since Oyite Ojok was with the Tanzanians who captured Kampala, he was the one who announced the overthrow of Idi Amin. He did it the traditional Lwo style by blowing a horn on Radio Uganda. The Lwo celebrate victory by blowing the hunting horn (*Bila*). All over northern Uganda Ojok Oyite's *bila* message caused spontaneous jubilations. Up to today there is a popular song among the Acholi which says in part that "Ojok Oyite blew his *bila* on Radio to liberate us from a killer". Oyite's message was "we are back" and this marked the return of the "martial race" to power.

### **The Peoples' War against Obote and Okello**

This section contains a detailed account of the major people's struggle against military ethnocracy and dictatorship in Uganda. It shows how the martial race concept collapsed in the face of a determined uprising by people hitherto regarded to be of no military significance. In 1979, Ugandans discovered that it was easier to overthrow a bad government than to create a good one (Brett 1995: 140). National Elections were held on 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1980. Four political parties participated in these elections. These were the Conservative party (CP), the Democratic Party (DP), the Uganda Patriotic Movement (UPM) and the Uganda Peoples' Congress (UPC). During the campaigns Yoweri Museveni, leader of UPM, had warned that if the national elections were rigged, he would organise a people's war to attain democracy and the rule of law. Nobody took heed and UPC was declared the winner.

Following on his promise, Yoweri Museveni immediately canvassed the support of some of his FRONASA cadres who were by now part of the national army, the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA). With

35 people equipped with 27 rifles, he took to the bush to start the protracted people's struggle, which lasted five years. Before this happened, there was divided opinion among the fighters as to what was the appropriate strategy. There were some who advocated a coup de' tat. This approach was rejected on the grounds that Uganda had had bitter experiences of a coup under Idi Amin and would not readily accept another government coming in power this way. Second, the Tanzanian troops who had instructions to protect Obote's government could easily suppress a coup (Katumba, 2000: 162).

It was from the initial force of FRONASA and some elites who had been in his UPM that Yoweri Museveni formed the NRA. Asked why he took to the bush to fight Obote, Museveni reportedly said, "The main problem in Uganda is that the leadership has mainly been from the north. The majority southerners who are mainly Bantu have played a peripheral role all these years since independence in 1962" (Drum Magazine (East), October 1985; 9). Museveni alone, by no means, held this view. Many other politicians in the Bantu regions of Uganda shared it.

In the first weeks of the war, the guerrillas consisted of a small group of political activists. Most of them belonged to the UPM party, which had been founded in 1980 and had been unsuccessful in the elections of that year (Schubert, 2006: 99). The rebels tried as much as possible to remain a militant organization as opposed to a militarist one. A militarist organization would mean that the NRA sees its mission in the struggle as creating a military machine to defeat Obote without any political program and structure among the people. On the other hand if the NRA is a militant organization, it would mean that it primarily has a political program and a political structure among the people in addition to its military structure (Baker, 2004: 2)

Many other rebel movements emerged to challenge Obote's rule. These were Uganda Freedom Fighters (UFF) led by former President Yusuf Lule and the Uganda Freedom Movement (UFM) under Dr. Lutakome Kayira fighting in central Uganda. In West Nile the former soldiers of Idi Amin also organized some resistance against the UPC government but were defeated within a short time. In June 1981 the Popular Resistance Army (PRA) led by Yoweri Museveni merged with the Uganda Freedom Fighters (UFF) of Professor Yusufu Lule in Nairobi to form the national Resistance Army (NRA) (Museveni, 1997: 141).

The NRA war of 1981 to 1986 was symptomatic of the long standing political and military squabbles since independence. Though one can assert that UFM and UFF sprang up due to the circumstances that led to the removal of Godfrey Binaisa and Yusuf Lule, the PRA metamorphosed from the earlier movements. It appears Yoweri Museveni who became the Leader of PRA and later NRA had planned much earlier than 1981 to wrest the control of the army and government from people of

northern Uganda. In one interview, before the war against Idi Amin started, Museveni's considered opinion was that the choice between Amin and Obote was not pleasant and Uganda needed a fresh beginning (HURIPEC 2003: 21).

The NRA/M had a robust political program, promising the restoration of democracy, the restoration of security and the consolidation of national unity among other core objectives, and then became attractive to its audiences especially the educated elite and the peasants in the countryside. These promises were attractive because the socio-economic and political environment in Uganda was appalling and characterized by a high number of refugees, existence of various ethnic-based insurgent groups, absence of the rule of law, general economic decay and economic instability. Whereas the UNLA relied heavily on military force and applied brutal force in the combat zones to clear what they perceived to be rebel hideouts, the military-centric approach, as it were, had the third-order effect of antagonizing and alienating the otherwise neutral population in the contested areas. Consequently, the NRA had more supporters in central Uganda, which was the epicenter of the war, and was able to build a formidable force (Ondoga, 2012: 3-4).

The NRA being a pro-people's group had in its ranks all categories of volunteers including men, women and children. Whenever the NRA captured a territory, the population was surprised not only by the women fighters, but also by the many child soldiers. In June 1986, after the NRA had conquered the entire country, Museveni's government reported the number of child soldiers to be 3000. According to this figure, child soldiers comprised 25 to 30 per cent of the NRA by the time it assumed power. The NRA has denied intentionally recruiting children. After 1986, the president declared that the parents of the child soldiers had died during the war and left their children as helpless orphans, who were then taken up and cared for by the guerrillas (Schubert 2006: 106). One NRA bush officer made the following revelation:

*We even got children with less than ten years. They grew up in the bush. You could give a gun to a child that couldn't touch the trigger because the hand was too small. But we tried to train them. We gave them the Uzi gun because it is short. Those children came when government soldiers had entered the area. Their parents had been killed (Schubert 2006: 107).*

Since the majority of NRA fighters were peasants, religion and superstition crept into the minds of the combatants. This was decisively dealt with by the commanders otherwise relying on superstition would have subjected the NRA to the tragedy that befell the Holy Spirit Mobile Fighters of Alice Lakwena in 1987. In dealing with superstition during the war, Schubert (2006:

108), quotes Yoweri Museveni thus:

*We also had some of our peasant soldiers who believed that if they carried reeds to battle, they would not be shot. We had to confront this and rule that anybody who said anything about carrying reeds to into battle would be shot by firing squad. We said we would give him his reed, let him perform his ceremonies and shoot him to see whether or not his reed would protect him. That was the end of the reed theory in our army.*

In December 1981, the leadership issued the NRA's code of conduct, which provided regulations for guerrilla fighters' behavior toward the civilian population as well as toward other guerrillas. According to the code of conduct, murder, rape, betrayal and refusal to obey an order leading to fatalities were punished with death penalty. Depending on the severity of the offence, other violations were punished with imprisonment, beating or demotion (Schubert, 2006: 110). The code of conduct was necessary because as argued by Amaza (1998: 28), the NRA was a people's army leading a people's war, the bush war was no mere elite struggle, it was a revolution aimed at replacing the old regime with structures molded during the course of the struggle by the masses in accordance with their interests and the demands of the time.

Throughout the peoples struggle, the NRA leadership was enthralled with the possibilities of popular justice: a justice that was said to be popular in form because its language was open and accessible; popular in functioning because its proceedings involved active community participation, and popular in substance because judges were drawn from the people and gave judgment in the interest of the people (Baker, 2004: 1). They undertook settling disputes and adjudicating cases within the local communities.

A year and a half after the NRA began its guerrilla war, it introduced elections for village officials throughout the territory it controlled. Kasfir (2005: 271) notes that these elections created the first democratic governments ever constituted in Uganda's villages. This policy was in conformity with the ideology behind the war, that is, a peoples struggle against dictatorship. The Resistance Councils (RCs) not only replaced government structures, but roles formerly undertaken by the chiefs who had been so discredited by political appointments and patrician activities as to have lost all legitimacy (Baker, 2004: 3).

The idea of village governments under elected leaders was first introduced in Uganda after the 1979 liberation war against Idi Amin. Tanzanians and Ugandan nationalists who returned with them emphasized what they called *Milango Kumi* (Ten households) or literally "ten doors". Ten households in a village formed a local government and elected their leaders to handle minor cases of crime, disputes and decisions on matters

affecting everybody in the village. This was the idea that the NRA/M modified, perfected and transformed into the Resistance Councils. As the Obote regime lost its grip in the course of the war, so the NRA established in the areas they controlled, the tiered structure of Resistance Councils (RCs) at village (RC 1), Parish (RC 2) and sub-county (RC 3) level. All the adult people of a village formed the RC 1, from which they elected a committee of nine to run the local affairs of the village on a day to day basis (Baker, 2004: 2).

In the conventional view, winning the hearts and minds of ordinary citizens is necessary for success in guerrilla war. The richest source of power to wage war lies in the masses of the people (Mao, 1975: 232). In order to wage war against an existing government, guerrilla organizations based inside the country must depend on local inhabitants for food, protection against betrayal, and usually for recruits and intelligence. Even where guerrillas operate from an external sanctuary, they usually have to depend on civilian contacts for supplies and security during incursions. Civilians living in rural areas controlled by the NRA developed strong loyalties toward the guerrilla army and supplied food and other goods generously.

An assessment by Kasfir (2005: 278) shows that the NRA rebellion passed through five phases; in the first phase approximately from February to August 1981, a tiny group of fighters dependent on a few local contacts entered the Luwero Triangle and created a civilian network. In the second phase from September 1981 to February 1983, the NRA created a fluid 'semi safe zone' in which it could establish open and democratic political organizations in the villages. The third phase, March 1983 to December 1983, involved the end of the safe zone and the mass evacuation of civilians into the northern and western parts of Luwero Triangle, followed by the NRA escorting most civilians out of the war zones.

The fourth phase approximately February 1984 to March 1985 involved successful military operations in both depopulated and populated areas in the Luwero Triangle and raids in nearby districts with limited NRA attention to the cultivation of civilian support in the Luwero Triangle. In the last phase, April 1985 through the end of the war, the NRA established a second front in the western region, which soon amounted to a regional safe zone. It also invested great efforts in creating mechanisms of popular support there and renewed them in Luwero Triangle, as civilians returned home. In the final months it engaged in conventional war to take Kampala and then control over the country (Kasfir, 2005: 280).

The NRA was rivaled by Kayira's UFM. Some Baganda peasants saw the NRA as being for Banyankole and UFM for Baganda. One Muganda civilian who became a stalwart supporter and later an officer of the NRA, said that if Andrew Kayiira, the leader of UFM, had prevented his soldiers from using guns to threaten civilians, she

would have gone with him, as he was a Muganda (Kasfir, 2005: 282). The fact that Baganda peasants abandoned Kayira, a fellow Muganda, and followed Museveni, a Munyankole, shows that the driving force in the rebellion was not tribalism but nationalism.

The NRA placed a Political Commissar (PC) in every unit, connected by a hierarchy to a Chief Political Commissar (CPC), while also subject to their immediate commander. The PCs were there from the beginning of the war. The idea of political commissars had come from observing FRELIMO's methods of politicization. They were responsible for the political education of both the fighters and civilians (Kasfir, 2005: 287). Political education certainly generated enthusiastic popular support for the movement.

Since the NRA/NRM war was a peoples' struggle, the force did not harass civilians for food or even support. In the word of Museveni (1997: 132):

*We paid for everything because we did not want to use 'voluntary contributions' from the peasants for fear of the system being abused. We would be given money by our supporters inside and outside the country which we distributed among our units.*

Initially, the NRA used guerrilla tactics because it was too weak to confront the UNLA conventionally. Guerrilla tactics proved very effective especially between 1981 and 1984 when there was an acute lack of guns and munitions. Schubert (2006: 93) quotes one NRA commander thus:

*Guerrillas don't die easily. We used guerrilla tactics of fighting. Sniping, for instance, is a very effective guerrilla way of fighting. You just go and snipe at one soldier who is on sentry meeting and then you disappear into the forest for a week. Just kill one. But then he demoralizes the rest. Somebody who has gone to fetch water from the borehole, you aim at him, shoot him and then you disappear. These are guerrilla tactics of fighting. So that your job is to reduce the numbers of the enemy but to preserve yourself. Preservation of the self is most important in a guerrilla war.*

Many Ugandans still nurture the perception that if one's ethnic group is not in power, one's security is not guaranteed. There is little doubt that Otunnu's observations on the NRA/M was born out of this sentiment. "The most striking characteristic of President Yoweri Museveni's early moves" writes Otunnu (1987: 176), "has been his manipulation of ethnic and linguistic factors for political ends. This has its roots in the years of his guerrilla war and beyond".

He goes on to state that,

*His approach to gain support within Uganda was to appeal to ethnic and linguistic sentiments. Although he made several statements of his opposition to "tribalism" for the benefit of the international media, within the country, he presented the struggle for power as a confrontation between Bantu and non Bantu speakers and more specifically as a struggle between southerners and northerners.*

And that,

*Museveni's appeal to ethnic and linguistic loyalties proved very successful in winning him support, and he was able both to build up his army's numbers and to operate his guerrilla warfare against first the Obote and then the Okello regime from a base in a Bantu speaking area with the support of the local population.*

Then,

*He claimed that what he termed the "political mess" in Uganda had been brought about by mismanagement of the country, ever since independence, under the political leadership of people from the north. In an interview in November 1985, Museveni urged all Bantu speakers to rally around their common linguistic affiliation to attain power in Uganda.*

A newspaper columnist seems to share Otunnu's views when he wrote:

*Before he went to the bush I attended one of his political rallies at Kitintale in the then Kampala East constituency during which he stated clearly in a mixture of English and Kiswahili that if he lost the elections he would go to the bush to fight. All the other reasons that you hear the Cadres talk of were either cooked or arose later (The NRA/M war was out of opportunism" Daily Monitor, Tuesday August 7, 2007).*

The point here is that Yoweri Museveni and many of the Fronasa and NRA fighters appear to have made up their minds to undo the northern military and political hegemony in Uganda, even before the elections of 1980.

The NRA was largely composed of peasants. The peasants in Luwero triangle did not give Museveni support because they were concerned with economic and political programs such as land reforms. Their main concern was to remove the Acholi and Langi from power, and end their military supremacy at all costs. NRA recruiters would tell people, "Tugende togobe Bacholi". "Meaning let us go and chase away the Acholi". It is,

therefore, clear that the peasants who gave all it took to enable the NRA/NRA win were largely driven by the hatred for the people Acholi and Langi military ethnocracy in Uganda (Teddy Ssezi Cheye, "Why Maj. Muhoosi would make a good President," Sunday Monitor, October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2006, p. 6).

As Kisembo (1994: 239) put it,

*Since NRA was dominated by the Baganda and Banyankole, it dawned upon Ugandans that NRA was basically for Bantu while UNLF was for the Nilotics. This is how it was conceived in Buganda where the war had started. The view was later popularized when NRA crossed to the west. Almost the entire population in Kabarole district jubilated and held parties ... Therefore, before Tito Okello took over government; the war had taken ethnic dimension.*

UNLA forces in Luwero were referred to as "the Acholis," because of the large number of the Acholi who comprised its officer and enlisted corps. So dominant were the Acholi in the pre-1986 national armies of Uganda that in all parts of the country there were "Acholi quarters" around army barracks. Such quarters still exist in Kireka, Moroto, Mubende, Mbarara etc. For this matter, wherever and whenever the national armies committed atrocities, the Acholi were blamed especially during the time of UNLF. This, among others, explains the growth of Acholi phobia in the Bantu regions.

Mutiibwa (1992: xiv) places all the blame for UNLA atrocities on the Acholi when he writes:

*My second elder brother, Zeveriyo Luganda, and his two daughters were killed by Acholi soldiers of Milton Obote's regime in March 1983. My father, Musa Mukasa, was subsequently gunned down in cold blood by Obote's soldiers and buried in a mat because the Acholi soldiers who murdered him took everything that was on him, leaving him absolutely naked.*

Many other non Acholi were in UNLA but Mutiibwa singles them out because up to 1986, a strong feeling existed all over the Bantu territories of Uganda against the existing Acholi military ethnocracy.

During the five year guerrilla campaign against the Governments of Milton Obote and Tito Okello, the NRA composed a number of revolutionary songs. The majority of Ugandans heard the songs when the NRA toppled Tito Okello in 1986. The National Radio Station called Radio Uganda, played these "revolutionary songs" to the displeasure of many people of the north since they expressed anti-northernism and Acholi phobia. One of the songs went as follows:

*Kazi ngumu tunayofanya  
Ya wanainchi mwenyewe*

*Tulimupiga Obote  
Na tulifukusa Anyanya*

This is:

*This hard job we are engaged in  
Is for true citizens  
We fought Obote  
And we de-stooled the Anyanya*

The fighters who sang the song above believed that they were engaged in a people's struggle against military dictatorship. The *Anyanya* was a slang used in Bantuland to describe northerners in general. The NRA war against UNLA was seen in some Bantu circles as a conflict between southerners and northerners as revealed by Mugisha (2007: 2).

One of the first political maneuvers taken by the Government of Tito Okello in 1985 was to organize peace talks with the NRA/M. So strong was the aversion of the NRA/M to the talks that the threat of the Acholi officers in UNLA was overplayed once the Nairobi Peace Agreement aborted. These peace talks, which later became dubbed "peace jokes" were never a serious proposition to the NRM/A. This is how Mr. Bethuel Kipligat, then Permanent Secretary in the Kenya Ministry of Foreign Affairs who played a key role in facilitating the negotiations described the four months of negotiations as a process of "haggling and cajoling" by the two parties:

*"They began the talks by hurling insults at each other and continued to do so throughout the proceedings. Museveni denounced the previous regimes in Uganda as 'primitive' and 'backward.' He initially refused to negotiate with the Military Council delegation, dismissing them as 'criminals.' He in turn was accused by the Military Council of delaying the negotiation process unnecessarily. He then failed to show up for the consecutive four days, having left for Europe through Dar es Salaam. On his return, Museveni and his NRM/A raised new demands for the agenda. Once agreement was reached on an agenda item, Museveni would change his position the following day; or put forward new demands on the same matter (HURIPPEC, 2003: 21).*

It is clear that with this kind of maneuvers, no serious agreement could have been reached or even contemplated. It is also clear that no such agreement was envisaged by either side.

The NRM/A brought in Ronnie Mutebi, Buganda's Kabaka-to-be in order to reinforce Baganda's anti-northerners ethnic politics by playing up the issue of restoration of the Buganda monarchy to win support for the final push against "the Okellos" in Kampala. The anti-northerner ticket had been played out long before in the NRA training camps in the bush, mainly by Prof. Lule's UFM supporters. This had built up their enemy images of

the “northerners” in general being enemies of the people of Uganda. Ronnie Mutebi who lived in exile is the son of Kabaka (King) Edward Mutesa II whom Obote attacked and forced into exile in 1966.

About the time of the 1985 peace talks, a letter from Dr. Martin Okello Jasembo to General Tito Okello warned:

*Nilotics are minority in Uganda... try to reconcile with the Langi and other northern soldiers, so that you are strong and can face any eventuality. You can offer democracy to the civilians but you must keep control over the army, which is the only bargaining card for your protection from oppression by the Baganda and the rest of the Bantu (Kisembo, 1994: 203).*

This letter is proof that people of Lwo origins wherever they were found feared the Bantu communities. It followed that if the Bantu forces were to capture power in Uganda, the Lwos in particular would resist such a change.

In August 1985 the Okello regime persuaded the Federal Democratic Movement (FEDEMU), the Uganda Freedom Movement (UFM) and the Uganda National Rescue Front (UNRF) as well as Former Uganda National Army (FUNA) to join the military Council. Paul Mwanga was appointed as Prime Minister, but the division of Kampala into zones controlled by the different guerrilla groups led to the constant harassment of civilians and a collapse of social order. The NRA used this chaos as an excuse to ignore the outcome of peace talks held from August to December in Nairobi and was able to take Kampala with little difficulty in January 1986 and to set up a new government with Yoweri Museveni as President (Brett, 1995:144).

Many soldiers of the defeated military ethnocracy did not accept defeat. They fled to the north and into Sudan where they regrouped and formed the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA) to fight and return to power as reported by Tim (1991: 371), Robert (1997:22), Acker (2004: 336) and Branc (2005: 8). Wrecked by internal differences and weakened by lack of a clear ideological stance, they have not been able to survive outside the Acholi ethnic cotyledon. The group of Alice Lakwena pushed through the bushes of northern and eastern Uganda but as soon as she left Nilotic's territory, she was defeated in Busoga. NRA's counter insurgency wars have all been successful. The victorious NRA was, by Act of Parliament 208 of 1995, transformed into a government force and renamed the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF) and subordinated to civilian authority as discussed by Katumba (2000: 169).

## CONCLUSION

The NRA was the logical product of the previous regime's

repression. It represented the will of the people and was based on a politicization of the masses. It led a disciplined and rational army. Its initial military inferiority and the hunger of its fighters were interpreted as part of a long-term plan ultimately leading to victory (Schubert, 2006: 97). The leader of NRA/M had a vision to transform Uganda to a modern democratic nation. He has since been a beacon of hope in the Great Lakes region. A 1997 New York Times article captures the essential elements of Yoweri Museveni as follows:

*These are heady days for the former guerrilla who runs Uganda. He moves with the measured gait and sure gestures of a leader secure in his power and in his vision. It is little wonder to hear some diplomats and African experts tell it. President Yoweri K. Museveni has started an ideological movement that is reshaping much of Africa, spelling the end of the corrupt, strong-man governments that characterized the cold-war era. These days, political pundits across the continent are calling Mr. Museveni an “African Bismarck”. Some people now refer to him as Africa’s “other statesman” second only to the venerated South African President, Nelson Mandela (Mckinley, 1997: 3).*

The success of the NRA/NRM was as a result of the support of the people. This was precipitated by hatred for the military-backed government of Obote and exacerbated by the government force's violent methods in fighting the insurgency. The final blow came through the weakening of the regime by Tito Okello's coup of July 1985 (Katumba, 2000: 171). In January 1986, the NRA rebels made their final push into the capital, Kampala. For the majority Bantu, the road to rehabilitation then began. But in the north a new cycle of violence started in an attempt to regain lost hegemony. The Acholi hegemony in the military ended and so did the dominance of northerners in the government of Uganda. Above all, the NRA/NRM victory marked the end of the period of tyranny and state-inspired violence. Uganda, as reported by (Bayart et al. 1999: 5), is now one of the African countries where a logic of violence has been replaced by a political process of negotiation and rebuilding.

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