

In Idi Amin's Shadow: Women, Gender and Militarism in Uganda. Alicia C Decker, 2014, Athen, Ohio, Ohio University Press

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Like all good feminist works, *In Idi Amin's Shadow* starts by refusing conventional wisdom – which is that Idi Amin Dada was a singular and sociopathic man, whose military rule in Uganda therefore is exceptional and has no meaning outside of that country and that period. Instead, Alicia Decker uses this part of Ugandan history to craft an insightful theory of militarism and the gendered dynamics that drive it and are its legacy. Through a painstaking and comprehensive case study of Uganda under the military rule of Idi Amin from 1971 to 1979, she focuses on the way militarism constitutes powerful norms of masculinity and femininity.

She also demonstrates that Amin's militarism had a history, politics and culture that preceded it and grew out of the British colonial occupation in West Nile, and the use by Britain of its African colonial armies in brutal wars in Egypt, Sudan, and Kenya. The formation of the state of Uganda from this complex colonial history means that Amin's capture of the country through a military coup in 1971 and the progressive infiltration of militarism into the whole of Ugandan society from 1971 to 1979, as well as its lingering consequences, is made much more explicable. Indeed, we are left with the urgent question of how this case study of militarism in Uganda in the 1970s allows us to understand the transnational phenomenon of militarism today.

Into this history, a detailed and vividly rendered world is filled out and given life by the experiences of women and others rendered invisible by patriarchy and military violence. The intuition that marginalised people – those whose position forces them into the shadows of dominant society – generate knowledge that provides a fuller and more accurate picture of history, and therefore of its lessons, is fully realised here, through interviews with over 100 women and dozens of men who lived through the 8 years of

Amin's rule. This is supplemented by detailed archival research, including into commission reports that had been assumed lost from the historical record and unique material generated through patient, generous and reciprocal personal relationships that Decker developed with her Ugandan colleagues and contacts. As a result, Decker's book "ventures into the shadows" to talk about a "harrowing time" and its legacy for contemporary Uganda and the world. The metaphor of the shadows and its silences, dangers, ambiguities and lingering effects are compelling and deserves even further explication.

In this study Decker brings together two orders of social experience, those of ruler and ruled, men and women, but also elite and ordinary, official and intimate, public and private – orders of experience and meaning that are made visible and valued by feminist approaches. In fact, this book confirms the importance of an ethical and intellectual imagination unconstrained by convention for deepening our understanding of history, especially topics suppressed by political oppression. Instead, Decker asks in her book: what are women's experiences of militarised societies and how can we gain access to their voices? What is their role in the histories of political violence and in envisioning a post-conflict national memory? How does militarism both enable brutal violence with impunity, but also subject the men and women inside military regimes to militarised violence themselves? By answering these questions, In Idi Amin's Shadow teaches us, to quote Decker, a powerful insight into militarism and its "deeply gendered lessons".

Accounts of public terror, used deliberately and strategically by Amin's regime, have produced an epistemological challenge in the sense that the extent of such violence has been interpreted as a sign of insanity, barbarity and singularity and has unfortunately fed into racist ideas about African irrationality and savagery. This book instead addresses the rationality and logic behind the scale of torture and the often-public performance of stark violence used by Amin as a conscious political strategy. Harrowing as it is, the book counters the haze of myth to tell a fuller history of Uganda's history that also holds insights for us in examining militarism elsewhere.

African Feminism

There are many reasons to celebrate this book. Perhaps most importantly, Decker does justice to the place of gender, and of women, in history, particularly those who were silenced by military violence. Moreover, she does

so by brilliantly employing central African feminist concepts in her book, and placing them in relation to more widely cited and therefore paradoxically more authoritative western scripts about feminism, overtly paradoxical in instances where it is African feminists who have engaged most directly with African contexts.

But in Decker's approach we don't only learn about African concepts but about their complexity, for instance elucidating African concepts such as the relation of sex and gender as a non-biological relationship. We also find nuanced discussions of the work of pre-eminent African feminist scholars Amina Mama on militarism, Patricia McFadden on postcolonial and post-independence nationalisms, Jacklyn Cock on women's roles in militarism during apartheid and the anti-apartheid struggle, Nakanyike Musisi on gender in post-independence Uganda, Yaliwe Clark's research into post-conflict masculinities, and Nina Mba's comparative scholarship on military and non-military political regimes in Nigeria – this is a truly wide-ranging and erudite account of African feminist thought, as befits someone who holds a Masters degree in Gender Studies from Makerere University. Examples of the subtlety of Decker's approach includes an exemplary engagement with earlier scholarship, including the difference between warrior culture and militarised culture and previous gendered readings, such as Ali Mazrui's concept of "political masculinity," which have been both enabling and limiting.

However, the major African feminist contribution of this book is not only to draw on its broad archive and to expose its readers a rich African conceptual heritage but to elucidate a general theory of militarism and gender through a case study of Uganda – *In Idi Amin's Shadow* shows how militarism and state violence can become entrenched into state practices and eventually organise society around military violence as its core political principal. It traces how the logic of military violence can come to permeate a society and become ubiquitous, normalised and invisible, to the extent that people cannot imagine living differently.

Citing the major feminist theorists Amina Mama and Margot Okazawa-Rey, Decker observes that militarism is "an extreme variant of patriarchy" which generates and consolidates particular forms of gender. Militarism – which includes systemic violations of the bodies of citizens through the use of rape and sexual violence as modes of terror and the production of masculinities beholden to the military state – can nonetheless become a common and

almost “ordinary” political strategy because it is highly effective in enabling violations of governance through corruption and appropriation of resources. We also see that men who are drawn into militarised culture are nonetheless also vulnerable to it, and are in constant danger of falling out of favour, or being seen as feminine or weak. This requires ever more demonstrations of hyper-masculinity and leads to escalating levels of violence. Indeed, in Amin’s Uganda the idea of protection as a function of the state itself became despised and feminised to the extent that the police were seen as “women” who did not go to war, a contempt that “naturalised the violence and domination of militarism,” as Decker points out.

A critical view of gender and militarism is therefore crucial, both because militarism entrenches destructive forms of masculinity and femininity but also because an instrumental emphasis on women’s roles during military rule helps to obscure some of the violence of military logic by foregrounding limited advances made by some women, and promoting an idea of the military as protective, responsible and strong. Indeed, reading this, it is unsurprising to note the prominent use of the image of the family to promote militarism – Amin named himself Big Daddy, and promised that the military protects “the home” and “the ones at home”.

How can women be nurturing and yet militarised? Amin crafted a paradoxical image for promoting women’s visible participation in the state, yet was responsible for unprecedented levels of brutality against both women and men. As Decker notes, militarised masculinity demands “physical strength, endurance, discipline and heterosexual competency”, and a militarised femininity requires “nurturance, patience and support”. Because militarism is an extreme form of patriarchal gender, combat is central to generating militarised masculinity leading to heightened requirements for the exercise of violence, so the exclusion of women from the zone of conflict is required for women to support militarism “without threatening patriarchal social order”, by being symbolically central but physically excluded.

Decker demonstrates to us the danger of overlooking both the spatial and temporal dimensions of militarism – firstly, militarism has a history. Idi Amin did not spring out of nowhere. He was literally the child of a history of systemic violence perpetrated by the British during colonial rule. The West Nile, the birthplace of Idi Amin, was an area subjected to pervasive impoverishment and marginalisation under the British, leaving few options

but military service available to men. This was accompanied by the creation of a mythology of “martial tribes” – so that deliberate impoverishment was accompanied by a martial logic through the selective advancement of some Africans during colonial rule if they were deemed to be “reliable”, aligned to colonial ideology and racially advanced, and therefore given access to education and opportunities in the colonial administration, and the exclusion of others, who were described as racially inferior and relegated to poverty and military service. This was the pre-history of Amin’s military rule and helps to undercut ideas about the exceptionalism of Uganda.

Secondly, militarism seeks always to expand itself. Decker demonstrates the extension of militarisation in social and civilian life in Uganda under the rule of Milton Obote and then almost immediately under Idi Amin – for instance, through the passing of laws that allowed military control over the administration of justice such as powers of arrest and what constituted evidence, the growth of paramilitary units, the establishment of military police, the subjection of civilian officials to military discipline, and the proliferation of powerful clandestine military intelligence units, who acted with increasing violence and impunity. As importantly, the voracious reach of militarised social structure is evident in the intrusion of militarism into the psyches and over the bodies of citizens. Shortly after seizing power, Amin chose consciously to focus on what women wore and banned miniskirts as a way to legitimate and expand military power by a highly visible and popular strategy. Such strategies of diversion and populism take over the space of public debate and simultaneously enable theft by stealth through extreme levels of plunder and political violence.

To counter such a strategy of expanding state violence requires an ethical politics and courageous activism, as well as meticulous research and the reclamation of histories. Women’s and men’s insistent voices, such as in testimony before Uganda’s Commission of Inquiry into the Amin regime’s increasing use of “disappearances” helped to demonstrate that terror was a sustained and evolving state strategy under Idi Amin, and their testimony countered “the deafening silence of disappearance, indelibly recording a crime that was supposed to leave no trace.” In Decker’s interviews with them, Ugandan women and men both inside and outside the regime testified to the violence they suffered and that they witnessed, even when the effectiveness of the forums for such testimony were undermined by the regime. In Decker’s

words, the women and men “refused to be silent, giving voice to a crime that was supposed to leave no trace.” Such histories also reveal the ambiguities and ambivalences of survival under a military regime, and show that some of the strategies that women followed in a logic of political survival during military rule included uneasy silence, complicity and unevenly benefitting from the transient opportunities offered by the regime.

The proliferation of militarism is enabled by the myth of military utility as a solution to complex problems such as crime or economic inequality. The fantasy of efficient, targeted, effective military violence to address multifaceted social phenomena in fact obscures the way militarised violence exacerbates and perpetuates inequality, enables a vast scale of corruption, gendered and ethnic violence, profound psychological suffering, ethnic division and a cycle of political violence. Decker demonstrates that militarism proliferates and insinuates itself into broader forms of governance, ideology, bodily and social and intimate practices. This sense of state violence that intruded into private and ritual spaces and carried out with impunity under new laws passed by the military government has left effects far beyond 1979. Indeed, as Decker points out, a “culture of violence...became Amin’s most enduring legacy.”

This is a work of history that deliberately seeks out voices that have been left out of the formal record, contributing to the field of “history as meaning” rather than solely “history as fact.” Such a history as meaning relies on informal channels such as personal memory and Decker acknowledges that such memory can suffer from elision, fracture and inaccuracy. She outlines the meticulous research through which she established the validity of the insights gleaned from her interviews, without ceding the central feminist method of attending to the voices of those who have been excluded and silenced by the powerful. Charges of inauthenticity, partiality and insignificance are often used to obscure the violence of dominant classes, and this book counters such claims by buttressing its use of women’s and marginalised men’s voices through exhaustive archival and documentary evidence.

In describing the terrifying arbitrariness of opponents and ordinary citizens who were kidnapped or subjected to unexplained arrests and detention after which they were never seen again, Decker uses a noun as a verb – to be “disappeared” – which has travelled across postcolonial contexts from Latin America, and cites an unforgettable phrase from the Ugandan activist Thereza Mulindwa, who asserted that the country’s women had become “widows

without graves.” These resonant terms suggest the need to create new concepts to describe repeated acts of state violence which had no precedent and crushed legal opposition. They also show the value of a comparative approach, for instance, for understanding militarism in other postcolonial and post-revolutionary states like Egypt and South Africa. Importantly, for scholars based in the north, Decker’s study of the unexceptional case of Uganda can allow us to understand better the “soft militarism” of non-military yet still militarised states, like the US.

Conclusion:

Decker has produced a subtle, important, theoretically innovative and elegantly written study that centralises feminist thinking and shows why it matters. Phrases like “the utility of violence” and “the militarism-masculinity nexus of Idi Amin’s Uganda” aptly articulate concepts that are a lasting contribution to scholarship on gender and military rule. Significantly, the book practices a generous model of scholarship evident in the several pages of acknowledgements at the start of her book and pays tribute to the people whose courage and memories constitute its central resource.