

**Book Review:**

## **To Speak and Be Heard: Seeking Good Government in Uganda, ca. 1500-2015**

*Holly Elisabeth Hanson. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2022.*

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Holly Hanson's *To Speak and Be Heard: Seeking Good Government in Uganda, ca. 1500-2015*, provides an unparalleled unpacking of Uganda's history. Hanson uses an alternative approach to the dominant narratives in colonial, nationalist, or neoliberal historiography in which peoples' voices tend to be subaltern. The book invigorates the debate on political history by approaching it from an angle of good governance mirrored in the voices and practices from below. Aside from illustrating how social groups sought to build polities using voices, gifts, participation, and assent, the book also illuminates the relationship between good governance and the power of listening and being listened to. This book covers five centuries in five chapters, in a story approached with brevity.

Using an array of oral and archival sources, Hanson provides a narrative of how social groups struggled to blend the politics of absolutism with consultative leadership using various strategies to forge social harmony. Unlike other scholarly works on Uganda's history, Hanson tackles the subject with sociolinguistic flair. Hanson writes a people's history, unearthing the aspect of endangered historical issues, such as the power of the subordinates over the leaders. Her book is indeed a departure from establishment histories, which often glorify institutions and the political elite. However, her occasional reliance on sources from the leadership gentry, such as Apollo Kaggwa, a former *katikiro* of Buganda, and James Miti, a writer and spokesperson for the *bataka* in the 1920s, is noticeable, and at times, the voices from below are obscured.

In the first two chapters, Hanson demonstrates how communities in the interlacustrine region used speech to tackle socio-political issues and settle disputes. To Hanson, Uganda's pre-colonial past offers a model of a society in which having a voice and being heard were stimulants to good governance. Focusing mainly on Buganda, Hanson shows that multi-layered voices are necessary for effective governance.

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Questioning the notion of the *unchallengeableness* of pre-colonial rulers and absolute obedience of subjects, Hanson uses the example of the Queen Mother in Buganda and her clout over the *kabaka*, or king. In subsequent chapters, she discusses how the process of fostering a culture of good governance was disrupted by pre-colonial expansionism, religious clientelism, and later colonialism, which promoted mute subservience and criminalized the power of voice. This, in turn, bred inequality and violence, which undermined post-colonial aspirations for good governance.

The struggle for the right to be heard is further illuminated in the power contestations between the British and Baganda chiefs, particularly when it became evident that the British were bent on undermining indigenous political voices. Hanson shows that by 1896, Buganda's sovereignty had been utterly eroded as signified in the British attempt to tax the *kabaka* and to regulate the *Lukiiko*, which served as a Legislative Assembly in Buganda. She describes this as an absurdity that was only circumvented by the chiefs' vocal opposition to British schemes. Elsewhere, the Nyangire rebellion of 1897 in Bunyoro is used to situate anti-Baganda voices that sought to be heard. Yet, even though the discussion of these two events is well-placed, Hanson does not effectively convey the degree of success of such voices, given the events that followed. Buganda's sovereignty was never regained, and the question of anti-Baganda sub-imperialism was not fully resolved by independence in 1962.

Active participation as an ingredient to traditional governance is heavily discussed through the riots of the 1940s and the *Lukiiko*. Hanson sees the *Lukiiko* as an institution that epitomized a class-free assembly based on full participation, in which status played a lesser role in the face of logic and oratory power. However, the *Lukiiko* was compromised by the colonial administration and a new religio-political identity of the Christian elite, which in turn facilitated the replacement of assent by compulsion. Hanson's views imply that Uganda lost its insight and vision of good governance during the colonial era, which was not mitigated by the post-colonial regimes of Obote and Amin. In contemporary Uganda, grappling with governance, where clientelism is accentuated over politics of moral contract, the book offers lessons on the coexistence of multiple spaces of decision-making, which could be used in nation-building and resolving tensions. An interesting takeaway from indigenous politics would be to embrace the blending of 'power with' and 'power over' as Hanson implies on page six.

However, Hanson's book is not without problems. First, to a non-curious reader, it would sound like a tirade on colonialism, which the author blames for dismantling traditional mechanisms of political accountability and engendering the creation of new relationships, which bred disharmony. Secondly, despite the lucid and succinct style, some parts of the work are pedantic. The reader would also quibble with the balance of timelines, as there is more coverage of the pre-1962 period compared to the post-colonial era. The discussion becomes less robust as Hanson discusses the Obote and Amin eras despite dedicating a whole chapter to the latter. In my view, the work would be stronger with contemporary issues treated in greater detail.

One is increasingly frustrated while reading the work that Buganda is accorded undue attention. It is also strange that Hanson did not pay keen interest in avoiding typos and mistakes that could lead to distortion. In the introduction,

an impression is created that the earliest Muslim martyrs in Buganda were killed in 1886 by Kabaka Mwanga II rather than by Muteesa I a decade earlier, while the claim that Yoweri Museveni became president of Uganda after the National Resistance Movement (NRM) defeated Idi Amin's troops in 1986 is inaccurate. In some sections, generalization is noticeable, giving the impression that Ugandans were a cohesive unit, causing a worry about an over-simplistic presentation of pre-colonial Uganda.

Overall, it was a delight to read this work, so easy in style and so rich in ideas, ambitious in time scope but not on themes; it is a daring piece with bold lessons for leaders to contemplate regarding good governance. I hope this work will reach a wider readership, although, at its present price, not many Ugandans can afford to purchase it.