

of Islamic Africa, British imperial history, early United Nations history, and of decolonization more generally.

JAMES DE LORENZI  
CUNY John Jay College

## VIOLENCE EXCEPTIONAL AND UNEXCEPTIONAL

*In Idi Amin's Shadow: Women, Gender, and Militarism in Uganda.*

By Alicia C. Decker.

Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014. Pp. xviii + 244. \$80, hardcover (ISBN 978-0-8214-2117-8); \$32.95, paperback (ISBN 978-0-8214-2118-5).

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Alicia Decker's book can be characterized as a social history that focuses on women's experiences of the military state and the dialectical relationship between gender and militarism during the years of Idi Amin's regime (1970–9) in Uganda. Through successive chapters that deal with a diversity of women's lived experiences during the regime, she unravels the ways in which new constructions of masculinity and femininity emerged in the context a culture of state violence and militarism – and likewise, how these gender roles, behaviors, and practices influenced state-society relations on the ground. Decker also charts the ways in which emerging gender roles were related to the performance of gender during the military regime.

Chapter One makes use of primary and secondary sources such as published memoirs to unearth Amin's autobiography and the context of militarism and violence that shaped him. Chapter Two explores women's oral histories and memories to examine how Amin utilized violence and hyper-masculine performances to consolidate and maintain political power. Chapter Three assesses women's narratives and newspaper accounts to track state-led women's decency campaigns, such as the banning of the miniskirt in Amin's Uganda. Chapter Four details the contradictory effects of the Economic War and expulsion of the South Asian population in Uganda, outlining how racialized economic nationalism led to forms of economic empowerment for some urban Ugandan women. Chapter Five explores Amin's role in Uganda's participation in the UN decade for women and women's international politics, particularly through the lens of foreign affairs ambassador, Princess Elizabeth Bagaya of Toro. Finally, Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight use women's narratives and memories to discuss the impact of disappearances of women's male kin during the regime, the beginnings of state collapse, and gender-based violence, and how women dealt with the fall of the regime.

Decker's study is a fine contribution to histories of militarism in Africa, African gender studies, the study of the state in Africa, and scholarship on Uganda in the 1970s in particular. While Decker focuses largely on women's memories and experiences, she

makes an important contribution to the study of masculinities in Africa – in particular, the militarized version of hyper-masculinity that emerges among various social actors in Idi Amin's Uganda. Decker also clearly traces the relationships between gender and critical events during the regime, providing the reader with a concise gendered chronological analysis of these important years. In addition, she makes use of an impressive array of primary and secondary source material, including a number of unique archives, oral history interviews, national newspapers, and UNHRC testimonials. The text itself is interspersed with a number of excellent photographs and other visuals from this period, bringing new life to the 1970s for the audience. This is quite a feat given that this is an understudied time and place in postcolonial African history, especially due to political and ethical sensitivities associated with conducting research on this era of state violence.

The limitations of the study are that it caters primarily to scholars who are interested in this particular period in Ugandan nationalist historiography, with little attention to the legacies of gendered militarism in contemporary East Africa, the continent, or globe. While Decker's analysis seeks to 'engender' African history by focusing on both masculinity and femininity and the relationships among gender and historical events and processes, the study tends to move back and forth between the celebration of women's voices, experiences, and individual agency and the more complex project of engendering Ugandan social history. The result is that a focus on women's heroism tends to emphasize the project of correcting biases in African nationalist (read: male) historiography by inserting women's voices back into historical narratives. This diminishes the innovative project of exposing and unmasking the links between gender and militarism and its broader relationship to historical change.

Another significant question is that of the nature of postcolonial violence and militarism. While Decker seeks to detract attention from narratives of Amin's personality that depict him as barbaric, mad, and the purveyor of exceptional African primitive violence during the 1970s, the book does not offer a clear alternative theory of violence. There is no analysis of colonial violence or of the military as a colonial institution that might help the reader to better understand both the culture of violence and women's experiences of it during the regime. Therefore, rather than fulfilling the stated objective of delinking Amin from primitive African violence, the focus on women's voices tends to reinstate violence during this time as exceptional and related to Amin as an individual. The book would benefit from a stronger theorization of violence to help us understand how it permeates colonial institutions and re-emerges through processes, structures, and events as a result of the machinations of postcolonial nation and state building.

Overall, however, Decker provides an excellent example of the possibilities of feminist history writing by placing gender and militarism side-by-side in her study; she also offers a lucid and highly sought-after account of everyday lived experience during an era that continues to be characterized by an architecture of silence in Uganda today.

ANNEETH KAUR HUNDLE  
*University of California, Merced*