

**Review of *In Idi Amin's Shadow: Women, Gender, and Militarism in Uganda* by Alicia C. Decker, University of Ohio Press, 2014, 244 pp., \$32.95 (paperback)**

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Many Ugandans who lived under President Idi Amin's regime (1971-79) recall memories of horror, violence and instability; yet, as Alicia Decker demonstrates, some Ugandan women recall his rule as a period of economic opportunities and empowerment. Uganda gained its independence from Britain in October 1962, and until 1966 Milton Obote, who led Uganda's independence, served as the Prime Minister and then as President of Uganda from 1966 to 1971. Obote was overthrown in a coup d'état staged by Idi Amin in January 1971. Many Ugandan women rejoiced when Obote fled because they despised him for abolishing kingship in 1967 and introducing a reign of corruption and violence. However, Amin continued an administration of injustices in which ethnic and religious tension intensified and hundred of thousands of civilians went missing or were murdered. Decker underscores how Amin used violence as a sociopolitical tool that reinforced women's socioeconomic vulnerability. Yet in response to this violence, women took on greater responsibilities in order to protect and financially provide for themselves and their families.

Decker notes that although there are numerous studies about Amin's rule, very few include women's voices. The introduction provides an outline of the book in which Decker discusses her objective to analyze Amin's use of gendered violence. In the first chapter, "Violence, Militarism and Masculinity," Decker reconstructs the biography of Idi Amin and his rise to power by beginning with his parents and providing historical context about colonial rule and Uganda's independence. The second chapter, "Gender, Performance, and Pain," explores how Amin and his army used violence to establish and ensure political power; she argues that Amin's regime used gendered performances of violence to conceal the weaknesses of the military state. In Chapter Three, "Of Miniskirts

and Morality,” Decker employs archival and oral sources to analyze Amin’s effort to use women’s dress regulations, and women’s resistances to them, as a means to establish political legitimacy. The fourth chapter, “An Accidental Liberation,” focuses on the experiences of women during the “economic war” at the start of 1972 when Amin expelled the South Asian population and, by default, created numerous economic opportunities for Ugandan women of African descent. However, Decker argues that Ugandan women’s retrospective appreciation of that period had less to do with approval for Amin and more to do with pervasive disapproval of the current president.

Chapter 5, “Neither a Privilege nor a Curse,” recounts the experiences of Elizabeth Bagaya, Uganda’s first female cabinet minister who endured abuse, control and manipulation while working for Amin. Bagaya’s experience underscores Decker’s argument that Amin had no real interest in empowering women. In Chapter 6, “Widows without Graves,” Decker shares women’s stories of those who “disappeared”; they recall the nights that loved ones, usually husbands or male family relatives seen by the state as an enemy, were kidnapped by soldiers and never seen again. Decker suggests that disappearance was a meditated strategy to ignite fear and expand oppression amongst civilians and not necessarily as a performance of hypermasculine military violence. In Chapter 7, “Violence in the Shadows,” the downfall of the state is discussed through interviews and testimonies of women. Decker suggests that increasing threats to the military state in the mid to late 1970s caused soldiers to intensify their display of gendered violence. Gendered violence was used to emasculate men and humiliate men unable to protect their women. Decker adds that Amin lost his support by failing to maintain his rein in his security force. In Chapter 8, “Militant Motherhood,” Decker provides more insight on the experience of women throughout the eight month liberation struggle that led to the end of Amin rule presenting women as “dynamic historical actors” (p. 15). The conclusion discusses the gendered legacy of Amin’s military rule in contemporary Uganda, with Decker carefully noting that there is still more “to learn about and from women who continued to live in Idi Amin’s shadow” (p. 15).

Decker relies on over 100 interviews with Ugandans of all socioeconomic backgrounds to reconstruct Amin's regime and their experience (p. 176). She notes that there may be issues with reliability since these memories recalled a period twenty five to thirty years ago. Despite the initial challenge she describes with establishing trust with Ugandans, Decker illustrates the lives of Ugandan women vividly, and her sources include numerous photos, journals, media and other primary sources. These allow Decker to provide a detailed narration of Amin's family history, upbringing, military experience and all other events that resulted in his presidency in 1971.

The author challenges critics who attribute Amin's political decisions to mental instability or even sadistic tendencies. Decker notes that critics have underestimated the "degree to which Amin utilized gendered discourse to consolidate political hegemony and to maintain a certain performance of power." (p. 3) She explains his understanding of masculinity and femininity through the values he learned in the military—violence and heroism (p. 5). By analyzing his policies from a gender perspective, Decker highlights how Amin manipulated gender to maintain his power. Amin commanded his army to emasculate their enemies through torture, kidnapping and public humiliations. Although Decker claims that Amin's understanding of gender was militarism, she fails to show how culture and religion influenced his views about gender.

Decker writes in a way that engages the reader. She illuminates the narratives of her interviewees in a way that resonates more than simple recall. In her discussion, she introduces new ideas as it relates to gender, militarism and violence. In addition, she draws attention to experiences of women that have not been previously explored. For instance, Decker discusses female smugglers during the economic collapse that took place under Amin's rule and forced Ugandan women to find new ways to earn an income for their families. Decker explains that economic sanctions led to many Ugandan women smuggling coffee across the border into Kenya during the global coffee boom. Although their involvement in coffee smuggling was limited compared to highly organized male

smuggling rings, women comprised the majority of arrests (p. 86). By providing these lesser-known yet important facts, Decker contributes a fuller understanding of the everyday life of Ugandan women during Amin's rule.

It is interesting to contemplate how Uganda would appear today without the legacy of Amin's dictatorship, as there are several moments that could have resulted in a change in Uganda's history. Using primary sources and oral histories, Decker insinuates that Amin's mother considered not continuing with her pregnancy. Another marker that may have changed Uganda's history is if Amin was dismissed as a lieutenant. During the end of Obote's rule, the governor of Ugandan, Sir Walter Coutts, had warned Obote that Amin "could cause you trouble in the future" (p. 27). Coutts viewed Amin as unfit for military services and suggested he be imprisoned or dismissed. Decker portrays Amin as a man who was also at the right place at the right time; his recruitment into the army began when he impressed a British officer while working at a Hotel in Kampala (p. 25). If that British officer did not become fond of Amin, would he have entered a militaristic lifestyle that led him to become President of Uganda? One sees with these examples how one small change or one person can alter the past, present and future.

One of Decker's most compelling arguments is that women are not victims of militarism; in fact, Ugandan women who experienced violence and instability are brave and resilient survivors of hardship. They performed acts of bravery and resistance by developing strategies to resolve violence. When women witnessed their husbands being dragged out of their homes at night, beaten, and thrown into a vehicle by soldiers, they found the inner strength to search for their family members despite the risk they faced. Many women reminisced about near-death experiences in their struggle. In 1972 when Amin banned mini skirts, make up and wigs, women showed resistance by protesting, speaking out on the radio and continuing to wear European-style clothing. They took action to restore stability in their country. During his last year in power, many Ugandan women participated in the capture of Libyan soldiers who supported Amin. Amin began to slowly

lose control of his security forces. The invasion of the Tanzanian army resulted in the collapse of his power.

Decker's interviews reveal the benefits and setbacks of Amin's rule for the average Ugandan women. At first, Amin's regime presented opportunities for women such as employment, education, international trade and more. As women steadily became targets of gendered based violence, these positions were difficult to continue. Rape intensified during his rule; it was so rampant that it became a norm for Ugandan women to learn ways to avoid it (p. 140). Using detailed narratives, Decker shows exactly how the man initially known as "the father of the nation" soon became referred to as "kijambiya"—the machete—due to his violent nature. After Amin's eight-year rule, Ugandan women were left again without security; they continued a lifestyle of violence and instability when Obote regained power in 1979 (p. 173). Like men, women also experienced psychological trauma and health problems because of Amin's rule. It is problematic to overlook Amin's human rights violation in order to embrace the good he has done for a selected group of people. Amin failed to produce a civil society that protected and advanced all people regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, political beliefs and gender. Overall, Decker provides a great body of knowledge to the growing field of African militarism, African women, gender studies in Africa and Ugandan history. Decker's book is a remarkable study that provides a voice for Ugandan women during Amin's rule. It captures the complex experiences of Ugandan women who either supported his government or worked diligently just to survive it.