

Luella Fitzgerald

Dr. Elisabeth McMahon

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Effects of Colonialism and its Legacy Case Study: Uganda's Environment

Introduction

In an information services booklet from the United Kingdom in 1962 titled "Uganda" the author cites the "hazardous journey into the land which we now call Uganda" by the legendary John Speke.¹ This adventurer and explorer had the goal of finding the source of the Nile River. Around 1856 Speke traveled up the river and soon met Kabaka (king) Mutesa I where they exchanged gifts and took part in the court ceremonial. It was not until July 28th that they made it to Ripon Falls and "Speke gazed in awe, taking out his sketchbook to recover his discovery, the proof he needed that the Nile does indeed rise in Lake Victoria." The small booklet goes on to say that

"Speke's discovery was the first step towards a century of British guidance and protection, so on the same spot we may see in the great dam a symbol of what has been achieved by Uganda with British help."²

Several decades after Speke's grand discovery, the British notion of a fantastical, children's story like country called Uganda remained. Prime Minister Winston Churchill speaks of Uganda saying that it is

"is a fairy tale. You climb up a railway instead of abeanstalk, and at the end there is a wonderful new world. The scenery is different, the vegetation is different, the climate is

¹ "Uganda" in *United Kingdom - Information Services*. (1962) BOX: 146/31

² "Uganda" in *United Kingdom - Information Services*. (1962) BOX: 146/31

different, and, most of all, the people are different from anything else to be seen in the whole range of Africa.”³

The fairytale-like way that the British Informational Services describes the “discovery” of Uganda as well as a later example of this notion with the prime minister of the UK begins our journey of how colonialism has shaped now independent countries, such as Uganda, in a negative way.

In this paper I will address the effects of colonialism as well as problems that surfaced post colonialism in the country of Uganda. I will specifically focus on environmentalism in Uganda as a case study to how westernization as well as the dictatorship of Idi Amin, and health crises such as AIDs has shaped this governmental failure. Using primary sources that cite the perceptions of Uganda, I will build my case as to why these western perceptions are wrong, and how colonialism lead to other problems causing issues with how the environment within Uganda is handled today.

This paper will use environmental policy as a lens through which to understand the larger impact of colonization and westernization on African countries. Focusing on the environment, gives us a specific example as to how a developing country has not entirely benefited from roots in colonialism. I seek to prove that colonialism through the British Protectorate, the legacy of post colonialism, and the dictatorship of Idi Amin have lead to many issues with how the country protects their environment. Uganda suffers from decentralization, ineffective implementation of environmental policies, and too much foreign influence from donors regarding the environment.

³ “Uganda,” Winston Churchill in *My African Journey* -1908. (1962) BOX: 146/19

Many of these issues may have played out differently or been non-existent had it not been for historical problems faced in Uganda.

British Colonialism

In much of European history from the nineteenth century onward we uncover thoughts on the “dark continent” “barbarism” and this notion by historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper, that before the westernization of African Countries, there was no history within them.⁴ He suggests that before colonization, African countries' histories are irrelevant and unimportant. Saying that:

“[p]erhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history.”⁵

That it is not until the Europeanization of these countries that they become relevant and worthy of being historical. In an article by Finn Fuglestad, titled *The Trevor-Roper Trap or the Imperialism of History. An Essay*, he sites that Trevor Roper put the label “unhistoric” on the African continent; the *whole* of the African continent that is, including Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Maghrib” yet he also sites that “Trevor-Roper remains a frequently-quoted historian,” which exemplifies this notion that well-respected scholars have continued to thrust certain ideals and images on to the countries within Africa. Later in this essay Fuglestad shares that Trevor Roper believed that ‘the history of the world, for the last five centuries, in so far as it has significance, has been European history’ and that there for, “History, or rather the study of

⁴ Fuglestad, Finn. "The Trevor-Roper trap or the imperialism of history. An essay." *History in Africa* 19 (1992): 309-326.

⁵ Nobili, Mauro. "Introduction: African History and Islamic Manuscript Cultures." (2017).

history, has a purpose We study it...in order to discover how we came to where we are.”⁶ Though he has a point as to how we came to where we are, this suggests that we can only come to where we are on the basis of European ideals and thus colonization.

Another important citation of Trevor-Roper that Fuglestad brings up is that of the fact that “the present world has been shaped by European ideas and European technology.” Though this is very true, to an unfortunate level Trevor-Roper believed “that the European expansion from the fifteenth century onwards and the later imperialism and colonialism turned out to be, from a certain point of view, one of the major “success stories” of world history.”⁷ This argument is flawed, however, in that imperialism and colonialism have not created “success stories” within these African Countries. Many of them still suffer greatly. It is because of European expansionism that many of these countries have undergone hardships and are often still considered developing countries to this day.

To begin, the Uganda Protectorate was governed from around 1904 to 1962. During this time the United Kingdom colonized the country and ruled the entire nation, as was true with almost the entire continent of Africa. Through the British Colonial office, the country had a big economic boom due to cotton and sugar production after World War Two in the 1940’s and can be accredited to the governing by the British. They led the expansion of cotton, sugar and tobacco exportation within Uganda. According to *The Commonwealth*, “By 1955, half the membership of the legislative council were Africans, a party political system was developing and

⁶ Fuglestad, Finn. "The Trevor-Roper trap or the imperialism of history. An essay." *History in Africa* 19 (1992): 309-326.

⁷ Fuglestad, Finn. "The Trevor-Roper trap or the imperialism of history. An essay." *History in Africa* 19 (1992): 309-326.

the executive council was developed into a ministerial system” and by 1962 Uganda was an independent country, separated from the British once again.⁸

In a specific look at the town of Kabale, Uganda, historian Grace Carswell cites the environmental history of the area. We will look back to this case study in particular, as it describes a specific town within Uganda and the environmental history with in it. According to Carswell, during the Uganda Protectorate,

“Kigezi [the district in which Kabale is located] was central to a food production system and market that straddle international boundaries and encompassed Ruanda and Ankole. Attempts to introduce a variety of non-food ‘cash crops’ were unsuccessful as the British consistently failed to appreciate the vitality of the food crop sector in the district.”⁹

Meaning that neglected the importance and growing pace of food crops over non-food ‘cash crops.’ Having not been natives to the land, British colonizers did not know what was best. Similar to struggles that Uganda has today with decentralization and reliance on foreign donors, it is the locals that should be making decisions based on environment, not those who do not know the land.

Later in the reading Carswell goes on to talk about soil erosion and even compares it to the American Dust Bowl. The processes and policies that were formed during this time were British owned. It can be suggested that they did not know the land as the natives of Uganda did. Carswell states that “annual conferences were held for Directors of Agriculture from British colonies at which policy to coordinate agricultural research (including soil erosion), and the

⁸ Hydrant UK, “Uganda : History,” Uganda : History | The Commonwealth, <https://thecommonwealth.org/our-member-countries/uganda/history>.

⁹ Carswell, Grace. "Continuities in environmental narratives: The case of Kabale, Uganda, 1930-2000." *Environment and history* 9, no. 1 (2003): 3-29.

findings of such research were discussed.”¹⁰ This quote implies that it was of British Protectorate members to make these decisions and discuss them. A lack of local actors was present, and thus, they failed at treating the earth with respect due to little knowledge. These are direct examples, that even though British rule, not all went well. In fact many environmental failures can be cited because of colonialism, and this is a foundation of what was to come for an independent Uganda. This further proves the point, that past history since colonialism has created struggles with decentralization, implementation, and taking too much direction from foreign donors within Uganda environmental policies and direction.

Early Independence and the Legacy of Colonialism

The early days of segregation from the United Kingdom were anything but peaceful. An independent Uganda was chaotic and inexperienced at governing itself. Like flying the nest, not everything went perfectly, and the legacy of colonialism can be at blame.

Following the independence of Uganda, Milton Obote served as the Prime Minister and then President of Uganda, as it changed from a nation to a republic. During the leadership of Obote (1962-71) it is cited that “his government constructed 22 big hospitals and at least 30 big secondary schools across the country.”¹¹ Yet, even with the good there was much political turmoil that ensued, as the country became a republic rather than a nation. Meaning that, being a republic, there is supreme power within the government rather than a sovereign state. This

¹⁰ Carswell, Grace. "Continuities in environmental narratives: The case of Kabale, Uganda, 1930-2000." *Environment and history* 9, no. 1 (2003): 3-29.

¹¹ “President Apollo Milton Obote,” President Apollo Milton Obote | State House Uganda, accessed December 14, 2019, <https://www.statehouse.go.ug/past-presidents/president-apollo-milton-obote>.

reflects more of a centralized version of government, and demonstrates a historical account of why Uganda suffers from a lack of decentralization today.

Additionally, though Obote wanted to maintain Uganda as a unified nation political parties were at unrest, and with a new constitution in 1967 Uganda became a republic. During this time though, the British as well as the Israelis has supported his government and the country of Uganda. In 1970 they no longer did, creating problems, that by 1971 Obote was violently thrown out by Idi Amin who became a dictator of Uganda.¹²

In looking back on the case study of the environment in Kigezi, Uganda, we uncover that the poor conditions of the soil and land during the Uganda Protectorate lasted a very long time. In a 2002 account of soil and water conditions in the Kigezi region of Uganda, it is cited that “the existence of well established indigenous and scientifically soil and water conservation systems soil erosion continues to be uncontrolled in Kigezi.”¹³ Thus, proving that negative soil conditions have lasted long after British Colonialism in Uganda. Furthermore, Carswell also states that

“The reputation gained by Kigezi in the colonial period is one that it has never been able to shake off...statements made about Kigezi’s problems today could be almost verbatim quotes from colonial reports written 50 or 60 years eariler.”¹⁴

This suggests that not only did this poor reputation last, but the impact that colonialism made on this small region was not good. Carswell also argues, with the help of other scholars, that the

¹² “President Apollo Milton Obote,” President Apollo Milton Obote | State House Uganda, accessed December 14, 2019, <https://www.statehouse.go.ug/past-presidents/president-apollo-milton-obote>.

¹³ Abesiga, N. K. C., and K. Musali. "An investigation of soil and water conservation related problems in the Kigezi Highlands of Uganda." In *12th ISCO Conference. Beijing*. 2002.

¹⁴ Carswell, Grace. "Continuities in environmental narratives: The case of Kabale, Uganda, 1930-2000." *Environment and history* 9, no. 1 (2003): 3-29.

independence period was observed to have soil deterioration as well as land fragmentation, which suggests that, at least in the Kigezi area, the environmental politics of soil did not improve under Obote, which reveals a legacy of colonialism

Idi Amin Dictatorship

With the fall of president Obote, Uganda became unrolled in the dictatorship of President Idi Amin. The country was in a state of terror under Amin, and it was a very scary point in history. Idi Amin plays a crucial role in Uganda's history environmentally, economically, and politically. At the beginning of his reign he was well liked by his country and got a lot of support. But, he definitely had some alarming characteristics. Sources cite him as being very friendly in one moment, than violent in the next. In her book of biographies, Laurie Harris writes that

“Amin himself became known for his violent, unpredictable behavior. He would be gentle and friendly one moment, only to erupt into anger the next. He ordered the execution of many people, including several of his government ministers, an Anglican archbishop, and the husbands of women whom Amin wanted as mistresses. He is even reported to have murdered one of his own wives by cutting off her limbs.”

And, in addition, that “under his regime, as many as 300,000 people had been tortured and killed.”¹⁵ This moment in history of dread and horror that lasted over Uganda for eight years was not beneficial to the environment in the country either. I argue that this regime, too, is the reason to why Uganda suffers today with environmental policy.

¹⁵ Harris, Laurie Lanzen, and Cherie D. Abbey. *Biography Today: Profiles of People of Interest to Young Readers. World Leaders Series: Modern African Leaders. Volume 2.* Omnigraphics, Inc., 615 Griswold, Detroit, MI 48226, 1997.

According to an article by John Hatton, Clare Hobsley, and Nick Smart: “In the 1970s, under Idi Amin's rule, poaching decimated mammal populations in Uganda and, as a result of the drop in browsing and grazing pressure, uniform scrub and woodland are replacing the species-rich grasslands.” Obviously, Amin affected Uganda in several ways, but this points out that environmentally he made a negative impact as well. Due to the political turmoil that Amin brought the country of Uganda, there was a “dramatic decline in its political and economic performance.”¹⁶ It can be addressed that colonialism, its legacy, the birth of independence, and then a dictatorship did not help the now Ugandan environment. In this section it becomes apparent that Amin not only created much turmoil in Uganda in general, but specifically for the environment too.

Current Environmental Policy Issues

Below are policies regarding the environment that are updated as of 2005. They will help us in uncovering what issues Uganda has with environmental policy, and then in connecting them back to primary historical documents. They also help to understand why the past (colonialism and all else that followed) caused for these current day issues.

Uganda's Constitution of 1995 with Amendments through 2005:

XXVII. The Environment

- i. The State shall promote sustainable development and public awareness of the need to manage land, air, water resources in a balanced and sustainable manner for the present and future generations.
- ii. The utilization of the natural resources of Uganda shall be managed in such a way as to meet the development and environmental needs of present and future generations of Ugandans; and in particular, the State shall take all possible measures to prevent or minimise damage and destruction to land, air and water resources resulting from pollution or other causes.

¹⁶ Hatton, John, Clare Hobsley, and Nick Smart. "Elephant poaching and vegetation changes in Uganda." *Oryx* 16, no. 5 (1982): 404-405.

- iii. The State shall promote and implement energy policies that will ensure that people's basic needs and those of environmental preservation are met.
- iv. The State, including local governments, shall -- a. create and develop parks, reserves and recreation areas and ensure the conservation of natural resources; -- b. promote the rational use of natural resources so as to safeguard and protect the biodiversity of Uganda.¹⁷

Though it can be argued that these are good policies in regards to the environment with in Uganda, they have not been upheld well, and Uganda continues to face environmental problems. These policies seek to better the wildlife, nature and well being of Uganda's habitat, yet as pointed out in the beginning of this paper Uganda counters problems with decentralization, implementation, and use of foreign donors. These issues can be directly correlated, as I argue, to colonialism and problems that ensued shortly after that time period.

Next I delve into two current articles that discuss the problems that Uganda contemporarily challenges. The articles prove that the problems I have named are responsible for consequences and complications surrounding the environment in Uganda at present.

The article, *Environmental Systems and Local Actors* looks closely at decentralization, and argues that this is what has helped and needs to continue to help the Uganda Environment. Researchers state that the decentralization process, in Uganda, "was intended to increase local ownership and improve environmental policy; however, its implementation has encountered several major challenges over the last decade"¹⁸ as it has not been executed well. Decentralization is the transfer of more power from central to local governments. The problem that Uganda faces is that the government looks at a much bigger picture, and it does not

¹⁷Uganda's Constitution of 1995 with Amendments through 2005, Constituteproject.org. (2019). https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Uganda_2005.pdf?lang=en

¹⁸ Peter Oosterveer, and Bas Van Vliet, "Environmental systems and local actors: decentralizing environmental policy in Uganda." *Environmental Management*, vol. 45 (2010): 284-95. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2819457/>

constitute more local problems. The article argues that decentralization is key, and strides have been made to do so, but more needs to happen. This article also gets at what has happened since the 1960's till now. I would add to that argument in saying that colonialism, along with what happened subsequently has caused a theme of centralization within the country. To say more simply, it can be argued that in many ways the Uganda Protectorate was an era of centralization. Centralization of government is problematic because it does not look to local citizens. It is more of a ruling in government rather than a democracy when it comes to policy. Native citizens need to be heard because they are the ones who live there and know the area in which they live best.

Earlier in this paper I cite that the British did not know how to protect the environment. With the specific case study of Kigezi, I talk about how the soil erosion, brought on by British practices caused the region to have a bad reputation years later. Because the British essentially took over and colonized Uganda, they did not take enough advice from locals on how to tend to the land. This can be seen in U.S. History as well, with several examples of colonization of native american lands.

During the Uganda Protectorate centralization was key, as the British were in majority power. The idea of decentralization is to not rely on big government, but rather small government. Being ruled by the British in the past has caused Uganda to follow in that footprint of centralization of government. It can also be argued that post colonialism, Idi Amin's regime caused centralization of government as well. Obviously, being a dictatorship, the government solely focused around the needs and wants of its dictator, Idi Amin. Thus the concept of a centralized government over one that looks to local, smaller, governments as well has not been present since colonization.

According to *How Effective are Uganda's Environmental Policies* what is more important for Uganda is to focus on implementing and enforcing policies through the government. Though both articles look to help in creating ideas of how Uganda's environment can be better, this second one is less about decentralization and more about the implementation of the rules. Though the arguments are different within these articles, they both argue pieces of my argument as to how Uganda is failing environmentally. Looking back at the constitutional policy above, the regulations on environmental policy can be seen. Yet this article argues that they are not being held up. Regulations may be written and stated in a constitution, but they mean nothing if they are not carried out. The author, researcher, Twesigye Morrison Rwakakamba, argues that

“in spite of these policy provisions, government commitment to environmental conservation is still questionable given the meager budget allocation to the environment sector in the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) and corresponding annual budget allocations. MTEF ceilings for the 2006–2007 and 2007–2008 financial years, which originally stood at 34.45 billion and 32.38 billion shillings, were slashed to 25.6 billion shillings (2006–2007) and 24.47 billion shillings (2007–2008). Moreover, these figures are usually slashed further in the annual budget allocation process, and so finally, when money is released, the sums are often even less than allocated.”¹⁹

These figures are staggering, and it seems as though the constitutional policies have not been in effect whatsoever. Also, that economically billions of dollars have been lost to the annual

¹⁹ Twesigye Morrison Rwakakamba, “How Effective are Uganda's Environmental Policies?,” *Mountain Research and Development*, (May 2009): 121-127
<https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development/volume-29/issue-2/mrd.1092/How-Effective-are-Ugandas-Environmental-Policies/10.1659/mrd.1092.full>

budget. This would conclude that the government does not care about the environment, and that they need to become more aware of climate change and its importance.

Another important issue to consider is how the money is being used and who it is coming from when thinking about donors and the environment. Many outside firms and organizations donate money to Uganda wildlife and the environment. The problem is that these donors want to have a say as to what gets done with the money donated. This is problematic as it is not always that donors know what is best for a particular region or area. Many donors are not from where their money is going to help, and thus do not know how to spend it most wisely. Researchers site that “donors justified their interference with the claim that “user-based natural resource management is the most reliable, cost-effective, and sustainable method for as long as the population is adequately educated and made aware of the importance and potential wealth of natural resources”²⁰ yet, they are not fully proficient in the environment they are interfering with. I would propose that outside donors are in fact very similar to the problems faced with colonization and issues followed. Because the country of Uganda has only recently (within the last century) been independent again, it relies heavily on outside sources as a developing country. Additionally, because of the reliance on the British during colonialism, as well as somewhat afterward there is a want to trust and rely upon outside sources. This, in some aspects, connects back to the problem of decentralization. Colonialisms role in the development of this country has caused for it to be reliant on others (which isn't always bad). Yet, when it comes to the Environment, no one but those native to Uganda know what's best for the soil, plants, and animals. Depending on foreign countries/donors to not only help the environment economically,

²⁰Peter Oosterveer, and Bas Van Vliet, “Environmental systems and local actors: decentralizing environmental policy in Uganda.” *Environmental Management*, vol. 45 (2010): 284-95.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2819457/>

but make decisions on what their donated money is doing does not benefit the Ugandan habitat as a whole. They need to count on internal actors and local citizens to know how to spend money in regards to the environment best.

To look more closely at an example of foreign donors/organizations, it is important to note that, interestingly, as of October 1962, the year Uganda became independent of the United Kingdom, the country has been a member of the United Nations. Though there are several positives to the United Nations, the environmental programme in it self participates in both the ideas of centralization and reliance on the decisions of foreign donors. According to the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) website, they claim that they are:

“the leading global environmental authority that sets the global environmental agenda, promotes the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the United Nations system, and serves as an authoritative advocate for the global environment.”²¹

Though I am sure that the global environmental agenda set through UNEP is well thought out and well intended even within their seemingly posed mission statement they are focused on themselves as the “authoritative advocate for the global environment.” Thus, they are seemingly all knowing and the environmental gurus of the entire UN. But, this cannot be true without the knowledge of local and individual citizens within regions of countries.

Similarly, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) does a similar thing to the UNEP, in that they are controlling environmental efforts within Uganda (and other African Countries) through

²¹ “About UN Environment,” UN Environment, accessed 2019, <https://www.unenvironment.org/about-un-environment>.

foreign donations and a centralized way of environmental approaches. Yet, I think what is more important to note that the website for WWF's branch on Uganda starts off by stating boldly that:

“Uganda is a landlocked country with an area of 241,551 km² (roughly the size of the UK) with a significant natural resource endowment of forests, savannah grasslands, woodlands, glacial mountains and an abundance of lakes, wetlands and rivers.”²²

Even in a modern era with booms in technology development and so called politically correct addresses, the WWF's site embodies what we uncovered in much earlier history. This westernized idea of a mystical land, of the “dark continent,” and of a place untouched by history. It even compares the size of Uganda to the UK! The notions of imperialism and colonialism are ever lasting in this example. Our contemporary era pushes common notions of colonialism still. At the beginning of this paper I talk about colonialism and ideas presented by problematic historian Hugh Trevor-Roper. I also quote from old passages describing John Speke's journey, as well as direct quotes from Winston Churchill. Decades ago the notion of an uncovered and mysterious africa existed. Today, we can still find examples of this concept being used.

In conclusion, this paper sought to take the case study of environmental policy to prove that colonialism and its legacy continue to resonate within current day issues. This can be taken to the broader context of Uganda as a whole, as well as other countries within the continent of Africa. We see that through history, the colonization of these countries has continued to create more problems rather than solving them. In the case of Uganda's environment, the three main issues they deal with are decentralization, implementation, and reliance of foreign donors. These problems are directly correlated to the Uganda Protectorate and its legacy. This case study of

²² “WWF Uganda,” WWF, accessed December 14, 2019, https://wwf.panda.org/wwf_offices/uganda/.

colonialism and postcolonialism is important as it exemplifies a broader historical context to current day problems and their origins.