ICWA
LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

AR-3
Sub-Saharan Africa

Andrew Rice is a Fellow of the Institute studying life, politics and development in Uganda and environs.

"On the Air"

By Andrew Rice

SEPTEMBER 1, 2002

KAMPALA, Uganda–One Saturday afternoon two years ago, Alan Shonubi and a small group of his childhood friends got together to eat, drink and talk politics. This came naturally to Shonubi's crowd. They were middle-aged, middle-class professionals, members of Kampala's small cosmopolitan elite. Shonubi was a lawyer. James Wasula managed the most popular band in town. Andrew Kagolo Seguya was a successful businessman.

"I said, 'Look, at lunchtime on Saturday nothing much is happening,'" Shonubi said. "'Why don't we sit down and have a chat?'" The chats became a weekly event. The friends, usually around eight of them, would meet in Entebbe, a colonial town on the shores of Lake Victoria.

"Once we'd eaten our pork, the beer would start flowing." Kagolo recalled. "So we would start arguing." Uganda was going through a tumultuous presidential election—President Yoweri Museveni was facing an old comrade from his guerrilla-war days, Col. Kizza Besigye—and their nasty fight had raised troubling questions about the state of Uganda's fledgling democracy. The talk naturally turned to politics. The friends would argue about the meaning of the events they were living through.

"And like all political discussions, they would never end," said Dr. Edward Kayondo. "They would talk until late in the night."

One of the friends bought a bar in Kampala called Club Obligato, and the weekly debate relocated there. Shonubi gave the informal debating club a name: *Ekimeeza*, which in Luganda means "round table." Ugandans love hierarchy—get a group of ten together for a drink, and they're apt to name one person "chairman," in charge of ordering drinks and dividing the bill. And so, soon enough, Shonubi was elected the first chairman of *Ekimeeza*.

Ekimeeza was something new to Uganda. Shonubi and his friends had all grown up through the terrible ferment of the 1960s and 1970s, through Idi Amin and endless civil war. "For over twenty years, we could not have stood and said such things and hope to walk out and make it home," Wasula said. "You wouldn't have been taken to jail—you'd just be killed and dumped by the roadside." Now Uganda was a free country, and they had become accustomed to speaking their minds.

"You see," Kagolo said, "we are now free to talk, to stand up and say anything."

"People couldn't believe it happened," Wasula said. Then, thinking of the problems to come, he added: "And with that kind of excitement, people end up getting carried away."

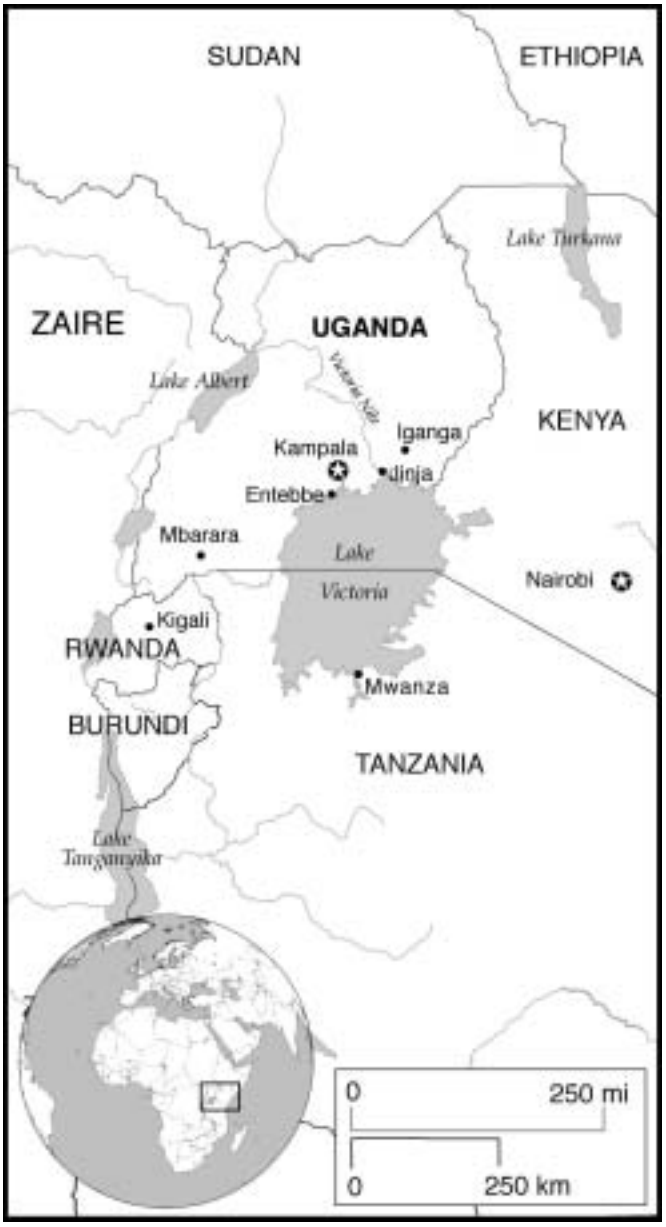
At first, the group was small enough that Shonubi sprang for a "chairman's round" every week. But the group began to grow. Friends of his friends brought friends of their friends. More than a dozen people came to see Lt. General Salim

Saleh, the president's rascally younger brother, sit in as a guest debater. "There was a lot of chaos," Shonubi said. "Everyone wanted to talk at once." So he wrote up a list of seven rules, establishing a five-minute time limit for speaking and giving the chairman the power to fine any "disorderly" person 1,000 shillings. He bought a bell, which he would ring when things got too unruly.

Then, one Saturday, someone happened to bring a new person to *Ekimeeza*, an executive from a local radio station. The executive suggested putting the debates on the air. That was when things got really out of hand. Before long, *Ekimeeza* itself would be at the center of a debate—one that would traverse Uganda's muddled boundary between free speech and sedition, and test the government's tolerance for dissent, leaving many to wonder whether they lived in such a free country after all.

***

Not long ago, I was invited to be a guest on one of Kampala's many radio talk shows. I was excited about going; I knew that for the vast majority of Ugandans, what news they get, they get from the radio. I wanted to see how these stations worked. The host had called and asked me to come and talk about a story I was working on, involving a man who had been killed by Idi Amin's regime. The man's body had recently been recovered from a shallow grave.



I arrived at the station with my head full of talking points. A few minutes before the show was set to begin, the host came out and greeted me. Then he explained what he would be interviewing me about: DNA testing. He was certain I was expert on the uses of DNA to identify the long-dead—I was American, after all. I protested that I knew nothing about the subject. "Don't worry," he said. "You're not my main guest."

The main guest, it turned out, was a private detective who had found the man's body. The host asked him to tell how he cracked the case, whereupon the detective embarked on a meandering account of his days fighting in a rebel army, his tribe's aptitude for police work, and his skill in martial arts. At one point, he stopped to take a cell phone call on the air. ("It's from the office," he apologized.)

Thirty-five minutes later, the host finally got to me. "How reliable is this DNA testing?" he asked. I mumbled something about O.J. Simpson and the descendants of Thomas Jefferson. He nodded and turned back to the detective. "Albert, continue."

At the end of the show, the host decided to take a few feedback-laced calls. I was amazed. They seemed to be coming in from all over the country. One told the private detective he was from the same town, in the far northwest of the country. They talked in their tribal language for a few minutes, before the host cut them off, explaining that he had no idea what they were saying to each other. Only one caller seemed particularly interested in me: "This DNA testing is right only 50 percent of the time," he said. As a man of science, I held my tongue.

This was my introduction to the most powerful medium for entertainment and information in Uganda today. The production values may be ragged; the phrasing may be orotund; the interviewees may, on occasion, be utterly incomprehensible to an outsider. But there is no arguing the radio's reach. Sit down for a beer at a rundown pub on the outskirts of Kampala, and you will hear it playing over a tinny loudspeaker. Drive down a dirt road in the remotest reaches of the Rwenzori Mountains, and you will see men walking alongside their cows, transistor radios hanging around their necks, antennas sticking back over their shoulders. In a country that often seems to be little more than an uncomfortable agglomeration of unhappy parts, the radio is a powerful unifying force—perhaps the only unifying force—that links the rich men of Kampala to the lowest peasants of the villages, a community they willingly join every day with

A man and his radio at the Ntandi trading center, not far from the Congolese border. Radio reaches even in the most remote parts of Uganda--and many say that's why the government was so scared of the bimeezas.

the flip of a switch and a twist of a dial.

Uganda's first private radio station began broadcasting in 1987, shortly after President Museveni took power. But since 1996, when the government deregulated the airwaves, the country has seen an explosion in independent stations. There are 57 operating around the country today, broadcasting in more than a half-dozen different languages. (Ugandans speak more than 50 languages and dialects.) The most powerful beam signals reach as far as Kenya. "There is no place in Uganda that is not reached by an FM station," said Moses Byaruhanga, Museveni's private secretary for political affairs.

At first, the private stations stayed away from news coverage, and today most weekday programming still consists of a mix of American R&B, African pop, and (maddeningly) muzak. But over the past few years, more and more stations have started newsrooms, and most of them now broadcast current-events talk shows at some time of the day. Many of these shows are top-rate, and provocative. Andrew Mwenda, who hosts an evening talk show on Monitor Radio, incisively interviews heavyweight guests ranging from Paul Kagame, Rwanda's president, to the head of the World Bank. One recent edition of Mwenda's show saw Col. Besigye, who is now in exile, debating the head of the country's military intelligence service, Col. Noble Mayombo. Mayombo accused Besigye of plotting rebellion and assisting the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the brutal and cultish guerilla army that has terrorized the north of Uganda for the better part of 16 years. Besigye denied the link to the LRA, but called on his followers to "train and wait" until he gave the order for war.

Such incendiary talk has been countenanced, or at least tolerated, by the government. "We think that this liberalization is a new phenomenon in this country, and these FM stations should be nurtured," said Basoga Nsadhu, Uganda's minister of state for information. "Public debate is healthy."

Nsadhu said the government has even made an effort to promote radio listening among ordinary Ugandans by encouraging the importation of small radios from Japan. The radios cost as little as 10,000 shillings (about $5.50). There are no village-level newspapers; even if there were, most ordinary Ugandans can't read English. Television is out of the question for most people in one of the poorest countries in the world. That means those little transistor radios represent the only link between most Ugandans and the wider world.

"In many villages these radios have become community property," Nsadhu said. "People all assemble at the home of someone who has a radio, and listen to the news."

In May last year, something new began coming out of those radios: *Ekimeeza*. The radio executive's offer to begin broadcasting the debates live had split the club's founders. Supporters of taking the debates public said that radio would allow their arguments to reach a vastly larger population. But a few predicted the broadcasts would be *Ekimeeza's* ruin. Could they be as free to speak with everyone listening? Would the club be overrun with outsiders?

The answer became clear almost as soon as the show debuted on Radio One, a Kampala station. Museveni had won the contentious presidential vote. Now parliamentary elections were approaching. Hundreds came to listen. The crowds spilled out of the large, thatched-roof enclosure where Shonubi and his friends had once convened their chats around a single table. A chairman's round was out of the question. Candidates discovered the debates; would-be's of every political stripe jockeyed for the moderator's attention. Many of the original members of *Ekimeeza* dropped out. Alan Shonubi himself found himself going less and less often. "It came into the limelight," he said, "and I'm not a limelight person."

Once Radio One took over, the topics of debate grew

more varied and provocative: One week the subject might be whether Museveni's ruling "Movement" should make way for a pluralistic system with political parties. The next week they might argue about the sorry state of the national soccer team. "What we tried to do is move around [the city] through the week and try to figure out what is burning people, what the burning issue is," said Irene Ochwo, Radio One's head of programming.

Ekimeeza became the most listened-to weekend program in Uganda, Ochwo said. "In Mbarara," a town about four hours to the west of Kampala, "people climb on roofs to listen to Radio One," said Jesse Okot, an *Ekimeeza* debater.

CBS Radio, a competitor of Radio One, looked at *Ekimeeza's* ratings and responded with that time-honored entertainment-business strategy: the rip-off. They started their own show, called *Gakyali Mabaga*, which means "you ain't seen nothing yet." CBS's one innovation turned out to be brilliant. Their debates were not in English, the language favored by educated types like Shonubi and his friends, but in Luganda, the language of the principal tribe in and around Kampala, the Baganda. Before long, working class Kampalans were lining up outside Mambo Bado, a pub not far from the palace of the Baganda tribal ruler, the Kabaka, to shout at each other in their mother tongue.

Gakyali Mabaga was a huge hit in its own right. So Radio One responded with a counter-rip-off: *Saba Saba*, its own Luganda-language debate. (The phrase means "explosive.") Finally, a third station, Radio Simba, started its own Luganda debate, called *Simbawo Akati*, or "throw down the gauntlet."

The Luganda shows' names promised confrontation, and they were as good as their names. Gone was the genteel atmosphere of Shonubi's round table; in its place was loud invective, sometimes scurrilous, often untrue, and usually directed at Museveni's government. The list of complaints was endless: the interminable war in the north, the repression of political parties, the alleged persecution of dissidents, and, perhaps most dearly, the government's refusal to consider creating a federal state, with Buganda as a province over which the tribal king, the Kabaka, might once again rule. Fines for disorderly behavior, needless to say, were not levied.

The new shows were collectively called *bimeezas*. But the founders of *Ekimeeza*, their namesake, could only shake their heads. All this shouting in the vernacular was very undignified. "Luganda is the language for the largest ethnic group. But it's not the sort of group that would listen to and attend [*Ekimeeza*], and they're not that important anyway," said Dr. Kayondo. "We get the middle class who come here. But these others are much more lower class." Alan Shonubi hated how the debates had become forums for "ad hominem attacks, sweeping statements that so and so is corrupt.

"People have got this newfound freedom, and they love to express it," he said. "And the excitement is such that some people don't bother to do their homework. That's why the government became worried—to the peasants, anything that comes out of the radio is the truth."

For years, the government had tolerated a large degree of dissent from Uganda's educated urban elites. (Museveni has repeatedly been clobbered when he's stuck his toe into Kampala politics.) The government knew that a negative newspaper column here and there wouldn't hurt it where its votes were: the countryside. Radio, especially the so-called vernacular stations, was another matter. When Besigye calls for rebellion in English on Monitor FM, the government sends a spokesman to rebut him. But when stations that broadcast in Luganda or other tribal tongues try to interview him, the government stops the broadcast. (This has happened twice in the past two months; there are now rumors of an outright ban on radio interviews with "exiles.")

The *bimeezas*, too, could reach the villages. And that was what worried the government. A story in *The Monitor*, an independent newspaper quoting "sources at the Movement Secretariat," said Museveni's men were particularly concerned about the Luganda-language shows "because their message [in a language many understand] goes deep into the peasants, where the Museveni government draws big support."

There were worries, too, that the invective, directed at a government that is perceived as being drawn from the western tribes and beamed to a Baganda audience, might rub the scabs off of some old tribal wounds. Rwanda is a next-door neighbor to Uganda, and people here haven't forgotten how the radio there urged the Hutus to kill the Tutsis.

"The masses, the majority that speaks Luganda, are very easily swayed," Ochwo said. "And I think there is a sector of people in government who are concerned with peace, who think that if this is not checked, it is dangerous."

Recent months have been filled with ominous signals that a crackdown could be imminent. One day in July, the organizers of *Simbawo Akati* arrived to set up their weekly broadcast from the New Life Pub and found armed soldiers blocking the entrance. The debate, the soldiers said, was off. The program went back on the air after a few weeks of negotiation with the government, but the message was sent: The government was listening.

On August 17, an *Ekimeeza* debater named George Aroma, while railing against the government's inability to bring an end to its war against the Lord's Resistance Army, accused it of callous disregard for the people of the north. Specifically, he claimed Museveni had once

called northerners "savages." Byaruhanga, the president's political aide, said the president had never said any such thing. He vowed to "take Aroma on," and suggested the debater would be brought up on sedition charges.

The next day, *Ngoma*, a Luganda-language daily newspaper, reported that Nsadhu, the information minister, had asked Museveni to ban the *bimeezas*. And a few days after that, Col. Elly Kayanja, the country's shoot-on-sight crime czar, called the debates a "security threat."

"I propose that they apply [for government permits], so that they can be guarded," Kayanja told *The Monitor*. "Otherwise, who guards them?"

***

By this point, I was curious about what exactly made the *bimeezas* so worrisome. So on the sunny first day of September, I headed over to the New Life Pub, a small bar along a dusty road not far from Kampala's Makerere University, to watch them throw down the gauntlet on *Simbawo Akati*. My friend Allen came along to translate.

At the front door, we each bought a lukewarm beer, and made our way down a long, dark hallway. It led to a concrete courtyard lined with plastic chairs. Allen and I took our seats in an empty row. A man in a straw hat, a floral print shirt and an enormous pair of sunglasses—the moderator—milled about the stage in front of us. The moderator held a microphone in one hand and a paperback copy of Uganda's constitution in the other. The topic of debate today, he announced, was freedom of speech and freedom of association in Uganda.

By the time *Simbawo Akati* had been on the air for 30 minutes, some 200 people had jammed into the courtyard. They were mostly young, mostly men, clad in collared short-sleeve shirts or English soccer jerseys, along with a smattering of women, some in traditional African dress.

After talking to *Ekimeeza's* organizers, I half expected the scene at *Simbawo Akati* to resemble the biker bar from *The Blues Brothers*, with chicken wire shielding the debaters from beer bottles hurled like points of order. Instead, the place felt like nothing so much as a religious revival, down to the call and response between the speakers and the crowd.

When Sebuliba Mutumba's turn came, he took the microphone and testified. Mutumba is a member of parliament and a leader of the Democratic Party, one of a handful of beleaguered opposition groups tolerated, though just barely, by the government. He wore a gray suit and dark sunglasses, and he worked the crowd like an aggrieved evangelist. Voice booming, hands waving, he preached the bad news to Kampala.

Two days before, Mutumba said, he and other leaders of the Democratic Party had gathered in the eastern town of Jinja, the site of the fabled source of the Nile, to rally against the regime. Hardly had they set foot in Jinja's central square, than the soldiers showed up, backed up by at least one armored personnel carrier. The group tried to negotiate. But the soldiers wouldn't budge. So the protesters walked away, singing an old party hymn, *"Ogumiire"* (the word means "strength") as they retreated. The soldiers fired tear gas, and beat them with truncheons. Shots were fired in the air. The protesters scattered. "If you want to kill a fly, Mutumba asked, "why do you have to use a gun?"

The debate over the *bimeezas* themselves, it was becoming clear to me, was impossible to separate from the most nettlesome political issue in Uganda today: the government's ban on political parties. Edward Kayondo, who now runs *Ekimeeza*, said the *bimeezas* had become popular because they provide a forum for the kind of political dissent that might, in a multiparty democracy, be channeled through a loyal opposition.

Political parties have been officially banned as long as Museveni has been in power. Uganda's constitution, adopted in 1995, does not completely ban them. But it does say parties should be held in a state of suspended animation until Ugandans vote to return to them. In a 2000 referendum, voters overwhelmingly chose to stick with the ban. So at present, the Ugandan opposition remains subject to a host of restrictions. A law passed by parliament this year requires them to register with the government. They aren't allowed to hold public rallies, to mobilize voters or even to publish political platforms. They are prohibited from opening branch offices in the countryside, a key step towards establishing grassroots organizations ahead of the 2006 presidential elections, when Museveni is supposed to step aside. What feeble resistance the parties have put up to these restrictions has drawn a tough response: When the Uganda People's Congress (the party of ex-president Milton Obote, now in exile in Zambia) held a rally outside its Kampala headquarters earlier this year, police opened fire on the crowd, killing a journalism student who happened to be passing by.

The crowd at *Simbawo Akati* was obviously unhappy with this state of affairs. There were scattered hoots when Muwanga Lutaya, a lawyer dressed in a black golf shirt, stood to defend the government's restrictions on political parties. The people had voted for Museveni's Movement in the 2000 referendum. So the complainers, he said, should all shut up.

Mutumba stood and cut Lutaya off, calling him a sellout: "That's not what you were saying when you were a member of DP!" The crowd went wild: Men shouted and clapped, women ululated. Over the din, the moderator stepped in to warn the two against making personal attacks.

"The people out there, they go a little bit high,"

Sebuliba Mutumba preaches to his congregation. Many argue that the bimeezas *became so popular because, in a restricted political culture, they allowed opposition politicians like Mutumba a chance to speak.*

Matekha Sams, a Radio Simba news editor had told me. But he said that that passion was exactly what made *Simbawo Akati* so popular. "What's really taken over people is the free environment of debate … A layman has a problem with someone—give him a microphone. The power is there."

This, Sams said, was something novel. English is Uganda's official language. But more than that, it is a signifier of class. The little people, those Luganda-speaking masses, Sams said, never felt connected to a show like *Ekimeeza*, any more than they felt connected to the deliberations of parliament. They may have lived in Uganda's capital, but they were separated from real power by a gulf of money, class and language. The *bimeezas* broke down that barrier, he said. And because the *bimeezas* are broadcast on the radio, their power stretches even farther—over the airwaves, through those little 10,000-shilling radios and into the homes of the villagers.

"It's like you're touching an area that's not been touched, that's not been changed," Sams said. "Broadcasting has a very big impact—radio, you take it all in with your ears."

But is what's going in those ears dangerous? An old man asked a speaker who had been at the Jinja rally whether it was dangerous to lead people into a situation where they were likely to be beaten. The woman replied by recalling Museveni's guerrilla war, and said there would be "sacrifice" and "martyrdom" in this war too. It was unclear whether or not she was speaking metaphorically.

A Movement defender stood up and accused the protesters of bringing the beating upon themselves. The law was the law, he said, and the Democratic Party had failed to get police approval for the rally. How did they expect the authorities to react? Muwanga Kivumbi, another Democratic Party leader, quoted from a copy of the constitution: the rights of free speech and free association were "inherent, and not granted by the state."

A woman in the audience, a Movement supporter, pointed out that constitution also banned rallies like the one in Jinja. She quoted a Luganda proverb: "How do you say you do not eat the egg, and still eat the chicken?"

Kivumbi replied: "You can't make milk if you don't own the cows."

A muezzin's call to prayer from a nearby mosque wafted into the bar. The argument went on and on. Many beers were downed. Later, long after the broadcast finally ended, the debate spilled out onto the street outside the New Life Pub. The combatants swayed on their feet and poked each other in the chest. This debate, it was clear, wouldn't end today.

* * *

A few days later, I paid a visit to the man who owns the cows. Basoga Nsadhu's office, in the Ministry of Information, was decorated with a poster advertising "World Press Freedom Day," and a gigantic portrait of Museveni, the largest I had ever seen in any government office. From behind Nsadhu's desk, His Excellency the President kept a watchful gaze fixed on us as we talked.

Nsadhu was once a journalist himself, he said, working for a number of now-defunct newspapers, as well as *The New Vision*, the state-owned English-language daily. His ministerial job now puts him in charge of licensing radio stations—which was why he now found himself, much to his apparent chagrin, in the middle of the debate over the *bimeezas*.

"When they started it was very developmental,"

Nsadhu said. "But I think why they've become a topic of debate is that these days, the politicians have taken over. You get the same crop of politicians at every one."

By "politicians," Nsadhu meant people like Sebuliba Mutumba. The debates, he said, had been overrun by members of the opposition. "These people feel strongly about the way our society should be run, and I think they're spending money to make sure they're the only ones who speak." I asked him what he meant by this, and he said he had informants who told him the government's political opponents were bribing the moderators of the debates to make sure opposition voices were the only ones called on, and were seeding the audiences with claques, paid 5,000 shillings to cheer the opposition and jeer the Movement. "If by going there to scream, I can maintain my family—why not?" Nsadhu said.

"The political-party agitators operate as if Ugandans didn't say they want to be governed by the Movement political system," Nsadhu said. "We in the government say we should respect the will of the people."

Nsadhu may have called the Movement a "political system," but it was never supposed to be anything so elaborate. When Museveni's National Resistance Movement captured power in January, 1986, it "presented itself as an interim administration," Makerere University law professor John-Jean Barya wrote in a 1999 essay. The plan was that the military government would rule until 1989, when it would hand over power to an elected government.

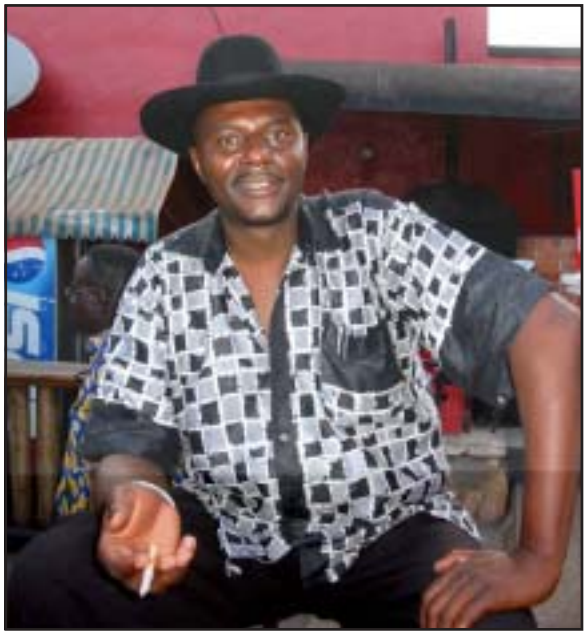
The country Museveni inherited had been through two decades of uninterrupted turmoil, terror and civil war. Uganda was—and to some extent remains—a country divided like a cracked mirror, its shards separated not just by physical space, but by tribe, religion and mutual distrust. Idi Amin and Milton Obote, Museveni's predecessors, were both from northern tribes. Both had presided over the killings of countless Ugandans. Both had found willing executioners among their own peoples. Reprisals were in order. But Museveni was determined to break the old cycle of tribal suffering and retribution. So amnesties were handed out, political exiles were allowed to return. He also began talking about his "interim administration" as if it were something more permanent, a new form of government for Uganda. The 1989 deadline came and went.

The ban on political parties began as an unwritten "gentleman's agreement" between Museveni and groups like the Democratic Party, which dates back to the independence era. The parties agreed to go into hibernation for a while, to give the new president a free hand to rebuild. Yet by the early 1990s, Museveni was advancing a number of theoretical justifications for permanently restricting parties. Parties in Uganda aren't based on class division, as they are in Europe and America, but on tribe, he said. If allowed to return, they would inevitably become vehicles for tribal grievances. Museveni proposed his "Movement" as a replacement. This Movement, he said, wasn't a party or a government—it was an all-inclusive organism that everyone in Uganda belonged to by virtue of being Ugandan. Candidates would compete in elections, not according to political affiliation, but solely on the basis of "individual merit." This system was closer to the way Africans traditionally made political decisions, he claimed.

Some say this "Movement" is just another kind of one-party state. But its supporters claim that maintaining it is the only way preventing a reprise of Uganda's terrible past. I asked Nsadhu about Dr. Kayondo's theory, that the *bimeezas* were popular because they provided an outlet for speech repressed by the ban on parties. His eyes narrowed.

"Let me tell you a story," he said. Nsadhu was from Iganga, a province to the east of Kampala. His father had been a top official in the Democratic Party. His uncle, his mother's brother, was an Obote sympathizer. "You know what they did to my father?" he said. "[The UPC] came to kill him, but he escaped. So they killed all his cows, cut down all the banana trees and burned down his house. They ran him out of the village. *Are you listening to me*?" I stopped scribbling in my notebook and looked up. "When I invite them into my house now, you know what my father tells my uncle? He says Museveni has saved your neck, because we were coming for you."

Now, the *bimeezas* have become a forum for these old political grievances, and that's why Nsadhu thinks they're so dangerous. "When *Ekimeeza* started on Radio One, it kind of had an exclusive participation, and the caliber of person who went there understood the prin-



Andrew Kagolo is a businessman, and one of the founders of Ekimeeza. *A supporter of the Movement, he thinks the debates have gotten out of hand, and should be regulated.* "Ekimeeza, the bimeezas, *are sick," he told the crowd.*

Some wondered how many would want to listen to people prattle on about politics on a Saturday afternoon. A lot, as it turned out. The crowds spilled out of the thatched-roof enclosure at Club Obligatto. Radio One knew it had a hit on its hands.

ciples of debate. I think *Ekimeeza*, where they do it in English, still maintains that standard," he said. The other debates were another matter. "It's like a political rally," he said. "It is the insulting language, the abusive language.

"The public, their own reaction has been, they think we should ban them," he continued. But Nsadhu denied reports that he had suggested a ban himself. He said his own inclination was to hold off. "We are not taking action yet," he said. "Maybe we'll talk to the owners of these radio stations. Maybe they'll shape up."

What Nsadhu said he had planned was "regulation" of the *bimeezas*. He showed me a memo he had presented the week before to Museveni on the subject, in which he said such debates "could lead to chaos and confusion if not regulated." The radio stations' licenses, he said, did not permit such outside broadcasts. "Why do you take a live discussion in a bar?" he asked. Such debates belong in a studio. "Let them be in your premises when they insult the president—then we will pursue the law."

This, of course, would have the same effect as banning the *bimeezas*; only a handful of guests can fit into a radio booth at any given time. But Nsadhu said it was of utmost importance for the debates to be more like talk shows, moderated by accredited journalists. "I'm worried about professional standards," he said.

I asked Nsadhu if he had ever attended one of these *bimeezas* that so concerned him.

"No," he said, "I wouldn't."

* * *

Should *Ekimeeza* be banned? On a rainy Saturday afternoon not long ago, the debaters at *Ekimeeza* took up the question themselves.

As the program was set to begin, a mostly middle-aged crowd sat around tables, eating plates of goat, potatoes and rice. David Mimusisi, who works as a mechanic at the American embassy, beckoned me to sit down with his group. He introduced me to his friends, Moses Kasule, a veterinarian, Sula Kakande, Kasule's brother, and Grace Masagazi, Kakande's wife. Mimusisi said the group had been coming to *Ekimeeza* "ever since it started." Many of the other old-timers were there, too. James Wasula was moderating.

"This is the people's parliament," Wasula said as he began the show.

Ekimeeza was, as advertised, a fairly tame affair. Wasula quoted the political theorist Jurgen Habermas; all the speakers called him "Mr. Chairman." My tablemates kept up a running critique of the debate, in English and Luganda, throughout the show. ("He's going off-topic," Mimusisi scolded one speaker who rambled on a bit too long.) But for the most part, every-

one treated everyone else with exquisite politeness.

Unsurprisingly, no one came out in favor of banning the debates. "I do not think I will try to defend these other small gatherings in small bars, Mr. Chairman," said the first speaker, a law student. But, he said, "You don't have to license people to speak. People have mouths, so they speak."

"If you went to *Mambo Bado*," where CBS Radio's show takes place, said Kennedy Mutenyo, "you have to line up to get in. There is even an entrance fee at the gate. If you go to *[Saba Saba]*, *Simbawo Akati*, crowds are there. Don't you think that the people are hungry for the truth, and probably they are finding it at *bimeezas*?"

Moses Byaruhanga, the president's soft-spoken political aide, stood to defend the government. "This business of banning *Ekimeeza* is just a rumor," he said. But he, too, said some "regulation" would be in order. "When you are talking live, it is airing unedited … [and] where there is no editing there must be rules to follow." He again promised again to prosecute George Aroma, the person who had insulted Museveni the month before. "The lawyers are convinced that the person who made those comments … committed a crime against the state," he said.

Many, especially among the old guard, seemed to be in favor of some form of regulation. They said it was their own fault—they had failed to uphold *Ekimeeza's* high standards of debate.

Andrew Kagolo Seguya took off his black cowboy hat and strode to the microphone. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he intoned, "the problem is not the circumstances; the problem is not the government. The problem is *us*." There was scattered applause from the audience. "You have to stand up and speak something which you have [thought out]. Or if you don't, for God's sake, shut up. *Shut up*!"

One speaker, a UPC Youth League leader named Kemba Higenyi stood up to say "zealots"—by which he meant people like Kagolo—"don't want debate." Then he rambled through a series of opaque metaphors involving children's games, bathtubs, and public-bathroom graffiti. Finally, the moderator tried to cut him off.

"If some people are going to be categorized as terrorists—that is a desperate measure, Mr. Chairman!" he shouted.

"I'm always having rows with him," Dr. Kayondo later told me. "He is a populist, which is a subversive tendency." Kayondo, who replaced Shonubi as *Ekimeeza's* principal organizer, is a retired pathologist. He says that during the week, he occupies himself by "looking after my goats and grandchildren, in that order.

"We've been joined by a younger age group," Dr. Kayondo said. (Indeed, as the debate went on, the bar had slowly filled with young men.) "Younger people are different from older people. They tend to be impatient. They tend to say things without thinking about the consequences. … It is at this point that we, the responsible people of the *Ekimeeza*, should add more powers to clamp on people who talk irresponsibly."

Appropriately enough, though, the most eloquent defender of *Ekimeeza* was a man in his thirties: Norbert Mao. Mao, a member of the Democratic Party, was first elected to parliament in 1996. He represents Gulu, in the war-ravaged north, and had come to collect some charitable donations *Ekimeeza* had taken up for his constituents.

"Ugandans are like people who have been in prison," he said. "When you get out of prison, the light always dazzles you, because you have been in darkness. You may get momentarily dizzy because of too much light. You may even go in the wrong direction. But the thing to be done is not to take you back into the dungeon where you have been! The thing is not to take you into the darkness!"

Later, when show was over, the debaters stood around the entrance to the bar, and talked amiably. There was no yelling, no poking. I pulled aside Moses Byaruhanga and asked him a bit more about the case of George Aroma. Surely, I said, if the right to free speech meant anything, it meant that a citizen could stand up in a public forum and call the president anything he liked.

"Even here, the president takes a lot of abuse on his policies—you just shouldn't criticize him personally," he replied.

Democracy in Uganda, he said, doesn't necessarily mean the same thing as democracy in America, Byaruhanga said. Here things were tenuous, and Ugandans had to be continually on guard against slipping back into the past. America's democracy, he said, worked more like a finely tuned clock. Elections come and go—even disputed elections—and somehow, it keeps ticking away. "People in the states don't even participate in elections," he said, "and that's positive, in a way."

And I had to admit, he had a point—though perhaps not quite the one he meant to make. As I sat through the *bimeeza* debates, I often thought that the remarkable thing about them was how vital, how immediate, these basic questions of democracy seemed to Ugandans. In America, where these issues were more or less settled questions, I had never witnessed this kind of intense engagement in politics, this feeling that freedom is something to be held precious, and protected. Maybe this was for the best—I certainly wouldn't trade my country's history for Uganda's. But somehow, I felt these debaters knew democracy, and practiced it, in a way I could only dimly appreciate. I only hope they can hold onto it. ❑

Andrew Rice can be reached via email at andrew_d_rice@hotmail.com

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**
A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**
With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**
A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**
A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **Southern Africa**
A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his six years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

ICWA Letters **(ISSN 1083-429X)** are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599
Web Site: www.icwa.org

Author: Rice, Andrew
Title: ICWA Letters - Sub-Saharan Africa
ISSN: 1083-429X
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia;Mideast/North Africa; South Asia; Europe/Russia; The Americas

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.