Institutional Life in Uganda

The Archival Afterlives of Prison Officers in Idi Amin’s Uganda: Writing Social Histories of the Postcolonial State

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Abstract: Africans historians have recently paid more attention to postcolonial archives, trying to locate these elusive collections as well as thinking more critically about how to use them. Uganda, in particular, has been an important site for reconsidering the role of postcolonial archives in historical research. Using the archives of Uganda Prisons Service as a case study, this article explores how official records can illuminate the social histories of public servants and the postcolonial state. Along with surveying the state of Uganda’s official archives – particularly those of the Uganda Prisons Service – it explores how these documents provide insight into the everyday experiences and concerns of prison officers after independence. Beyond its bureaucratic functions, paperwork served as a site in which officers could negotiate their responsibilities and relationships. Through the archives of the Uganda Prisons Service, we learn about the social worlds of prison officers within and beyond the prison walls, thus better understanding their experience of public service beyond narratives of corruption and brutality. Ultimately, this article demonstrates the ways in which official archives can be used to study the postcolonial state from a social history perspective.

Résumé: Les historiens africanistes ont récemment prêté plus d’attention aux archives postcoloniales, en essayant de localiser ces collections insaisissables ainsi que de réfléchir de façon plus critique à la façon de les utiliser. L’Ouganda, en particulier, a été un site important pour reconsidérer le rôle des archives postcoloniales dans la recherche historique. En utilisant les archives du Uganda Prisons Service comme étude de cas, cet article explore comment les documents officiels peuvent éclairer les histoires sociales des fonctionnaires et de l’État postcolonial. En plus

Introduction

On 5 July 1978, a prison officer by the name of Edward penned a letter to the Commissioner of the Uganda Prisons Service (UPS). Edward had joined UPS four years earlier at the entry-level rank of warder. He hailed from Toro District in Western Uganda where he had grown up, completed his primary schooling, gotten married, and started a family. At the time of writing the letter, Edward had successfully passed his training and worked at Upper Prison, a maximum-security prison facility located on the outskirts of Kampala. Edward’s placement in a prison far from his home was common, as the Service wanted to ensure that officers did not work with inmates from their communities. Over the course of their careers, most UPS officers were posted in multiple regions of the country, with some working in ten or more districts. In his letter, however, Edward claimed that the burden of living apart from his family was too great, and implored the Commissioner...
to transfer him to a prison in Western region. Along with his duties as a father and a husband, Edward was also concerned about his responsibilities as a son. “I wish to be near home so that I may support my aged parents,” he wrote, “as I really just owe them that assistance.” Continuing, he discussed the “social problems encircling me here,” explaining that working in Kampala was affecting his “personal welfare and health.” Transferring him to the Western region, Edward contended, would not only enable him to take care of his family, but would also make him a better prison officer. “I hope to perform my duties satisfactorily and with ease in the Western front,” he wrote.

Edward’s letter, written towards the end of Idi Amin’s notorious dictatorship, offers an unexpected window into the experiences of prison officers during this period. Until recently, scholars knew little about the Amin state beyond body counts and horror stories. During Amin’s presidency – which began with a military coup in January of 1971 and ended with defeat in the Uganda-Tanzania War in April of 1979 – it is estimated that approximately three hundred thousand people were killed, and many more were subjected to harassment and torture. These abuses – and the gruesome manner in which they were often carried out – have resulted in a range of sensational epithets for Amin, including “Hitler in Africa” and “The Butcher of Africa.”

In early representations of the Amin regime, journalists, expatriates, and Ugandans living in exile seemed to be simultaneously repulsed and fascinated by this general-turned-president, writing on topics such as his sexual exploits and his alleged cannibalism. For Western audiences, the carnage and chaos of Amin’s Uganda seemed to epitomize the malaise of the postcolonial African state. Academics were also intrigued, trying to trace Amin’s origins in order to pin him to a “warrior” tradition, or writing about his alleged psychological disorders to account for his erratic behavior. As Richard Reid writes of this early scholarship, “Uganda was Amin, Amin was Uganda, and he dominated observers’ line of vision absolutely.”

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4 Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS 34/4/1/UG 4; Amnesty International, Human Rights in Uganda Report, June 1978, AFR 59/05/78.
However, this is beginning to change. Recently, historians have done groundbreaking research on the Amin state that shifts the focus away from Amin and on to the experiences of Ugandans who lived through the 1970s. Drawing on oral histories, newly accessible archival materials, and a range of other sources, scholars such as Derek Peterson, Edgar Taylor, and Alicia Decker are beginning to explore the Amin state from a variety of perspectives, examining topics such as gendered cultures of militarism, racial identities, and governmentality. While not minimizing the violence of this period, or Amin’s role within it, they are instead considering the ways in which Ugandans navigated both the mundane and the horrific aspects of life in a military state.

Where do Edward and his colleagues fit into this shifting research terrain? Although carceral spaces saturate representations of Amin’s regime, we know very little about them. What we do know comes from the media and the reports of non-governmental organizations, which tell tales of grisly murders and grim conditions. During the 1970s, international newspapers ran headlines such as “Amin ‘joined in’ prison killings” and “I was in Idi Amin’s Death Camp.” In an article in the Washington Post published shortly after Amin’s overthrow, journalists Martha Honey and Tony Avirgan offered a lurid – but not atypical – description: “As we entered the dungeons today, we saw scenes of incredible horror – bodies in varying states of decay and mutilation, almost all showing signs of torture. There were pools of blood on the steps, and blood was smeared on the walls.” Some of the detainees, they claimed, had “survived by eating human flesh.” Recent memoirs published on the Amin years, such as The Dungeons of Nakesero and Escape from Idi Amin’s Slaughterhouse, evoke similar images of barbarism and brutality.

These representations do reflect some realities of incarceration at this time, but only in a narrow sense. The “dungeons” and “death camps” such as Nakesero were not actually run by the Uganda Prisons Service for which Edward worked, but were rather informal detention sites operated by Amin’s paramilitary organizations, such as the State Research Bureau and

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11 Avirgan and Honey, “Dungeon Visit.”

12 Avirgan and Honey, “Dungeon Visit.”

the Public Safety Unit.\textsuperscript{14} Yet, it is these images that dominate portrayals of Amin’s Uganda, leading to a blurring of different types of carceral spaces. While there were certainly incidents of violence and corruption within UPS, these were not as systematic as those in carried out by the paramilitary organizations. Within these renderings, prison officers become stock characters, only entering the script to confirm the abuses of the Amin regime.

Edward’s letter – written at a time when the violence and disarray of the Amin state was reaching its apex – suggests different ways of thinking about prisons and prison officers in this period. Taking the archives of the Prisons Service as a point of departure, this article examines the possibilities for writing social histories of the postcolonial state based on official documents. While Africanist historians have long struggled to find archives produced after independence, there is a growing interest in uncovering, preserving, and analyzing these types of archival materials. As more documentary sources become available, scholars in this field find themselves at a crucial juncture in which to think more critically about the postcolonial archive as a subject of study in and of itself, and also in terms of what it reveals about the nature of the postcolonial state. Using the Uganda Prisons Service as a case study, this article considers how official documents produced during Idi Amin’s regime can provide insight into the state from a social history perspective. Even in one of the most violent and tumultuous political landscapes in postcolonial Africa, paperwork served as a site of story-telling, as public servants sought to make their claims, concerns, and experiences legible in an official arena. As this special issue explores, studying the Uganda Prisons Service and other colonial and postcolonial institutions requires scholars not only to look at bureaucratic processes, but also to consider “deep, longstanding deliberations on questions of community, authority, and reciprocity.”\textsuperscript{15} Official archives offer a window into the “affective dimensions of institutional interaction,” providing more nuanced perspectives on how Ugandans have imagined, experienced, and navigated institutional life across time and space.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{15} Katherine Bruce-Lockhart and Jonathon L. Earle, “Researching Institutional Life in Modern Uganda,” this volume.

\textsuperscript{16} Bruce-Lockhart and Earle, “Researching Institutional Life,” this volume.
Government Archives in Postcolonial Uganda

Uganda’s archival landscape is one marked by both neglect and renewal. In the bustling Kampala neighborhood of Wandegeya lies the new Uganda National Archives. Recently purpose-built through a generous grant by the World Bank, its construction generated considerable excitement amongst both foreign and Ugandan researchers. However, despite its imposing gates and spacious reading room, the status of this site as an archive is precarious. Increasingly, other government ministries are impinging upon this coveted office space, leaving many scholars to wonder about the archive’s future. Approximately two hours to the east lies the Jinja District Archives, housed in the damp and dusty basement of a beautiful yet dilapidated set of colonial-era offices. Until recently, seasonal rains flooded the basement, leaving boxes of documents submerged in several inches of water. As a UNESCO consultant visiting the archive wrote in the 1970s, the storage of documents was a source of concern: “Some are on wooden shelves, others in cupboard[s], and share quarters with some old items of furniture like broken chairs, flags, etc. – a situation which is far from ideal.” Such is the fate of many archives in Uganda, where the preservation of historical documents has often been a low priority for postcolonial governments.

Over the last decade, however, there has been a significant shift in the condition of Uganda’s archives. Under the leadership of Derek Peterson at the University of Michigan, teams of Ugandan and foreign university students have recovered, organized, and catalogued numerous archival collections across the country, including the National Archives at its former home in Entebbe, and district archives in Kabale, Fort Portal, and Jinja. As a result, historians are now able to access many thousands of files that were previously in a state of decay and disarray. The Jinja District Archives alone have nearly fifteen thousand files, with the oldest record dating back to 1905.

Simply locating and making such archives accessible is a key achievement. For years, scholars studying postcolonial Africa have grappled with

18 J.M. Akita, Development of the National Archives and the National Documentation Centre (Paris: UNESCO, 1979), 5.
“how to find any archive at all.”\textsuperscript{21} For those familiar with studying colonial history, the postcolonial archival landscape is often jarring. As Jean Allman writes, a combination of “abrupt changes in state power, military rule, economic structural adjustment, and the underfunding of civil service and records management” have left many archives in a tenuous position.\textsuperscript{22} Writing about her experience of research in Zimbabwe, Luise White reflected on these struggles: “[F]or reasons not unique to that country, nothing has been accessioned since 1984, and while a few documents from the early 1960s are available – nobody seems to know why – the archive stops in the late 1950s.”\textsuperscript{23} Thus, the materials in national archives – long the anchor for colonial historians’ research – often obscure more than they clarify. As a result, scholars have had to rethink their approach to archival research, embracing a multiplicity of sites and sources. “This postcolonial archive is not the easy and direct descendant of the colonial archive project,” Allman argues.\textsuperscript{24} “It is not a ‘national archive.’ It does not reside in one place or even two or three.”\textsuperscript{25} Instead, the postcolonial archive is a “global, transnational archive.”\textsuperscript{26}

Having established the haphazard and multi-sited nature of postcolonial archives, scholars have begun to think more critically about what this archival terrain reveals about the state. White has encouraged historians to embrace the “grandeur of the hodgepodge,” viewing the cacophony of archival collections as an analytical tool rather than a logistical burden.\textsuperscript{27} The fragmented nature of the archive, she argues, mirrors the governmentality of the postcolonial state, illuminating “a world of disregarded protocols and slapdash paperwork, of policies made up as governance went along.”\textsuperscript{28} Similarly, Allman suggests an altogether different dynamic between the state and the archive than that which existed in colonial times, casting doubt on Achille Mbembe’s assertion that “the postcolonial state requires archival technologies to exercise rule and reproduce its power.”\textsuperscript{29} While historians still have a great deal of thinking to do when it comes to analyzing postcolonial archives, Allman and White have provided useful entry-points into this conversation.


\textsuperscript{23} White, “Hodgepodge Historiographies,” 310.

\textsuperscript{24} Allman, “Phantoms of the Archive,” 126.

\textsuperscript{25} Allman, “Phantoms of the Archive,” 126.

\textsuperscript{26} Allman, “Phantoms of the Archive,” 126.

\textsuperscript{27} White, “Hodgepodge Historiographies,” 313.

\textsuperscript{28} White, “Hodgepodge Historiographies,” 314.

\textsuperscript{29} Allman, “Phantoms of the Archive,” 127.
What, then, do Uganda’s archives reveal about the postcolonial state, and about Amin’s regime? Despite the level of violence and political turmoil in the 1970s, archives were an important aspect of Amin’s governance. As has been written about elsewhere, Amin took an interest in the practices of archiving, perhaps because he saw it as an important marker of “modern” governance, or a useful tool for enhancing his oversight of government ministries.30 During the 1970s, Amin’s government sponsored a number of students to go abroad to Ghana in pursuit of archival studies training.31 Amin also brought in the UNESCO consultant mentioned at the outset of this article to assess Uganda’s archives and provide recommendations for the improvement of archiving practices.32 The consultant, J.M. Akita, toured a number of other archival sites in the country, including the Jinja District Archives, the Ministry of Justice Archives, the Africana Collection in Makerere University Library, and the Archives of Rubaga Cathedral.33 Akita provided Amin’s government with an in-depth report, including detailed plans for how to establish a “National Documentation Centre.”34

While these plans to preserve documents were undercut by the Uganda-Tanzania War and Amin’s subsequent overthrow, the production of paper was an important part of governance in the 1970s. Ministries and individual government departments were expected to keep detailed records. The function of these documents, Peterson and Taylor have argued, was primarily performative.35 Through the creative fabrication of documents, public servants wrote themselves into the annals of the Amin state, asserting their importance and loyalty. “Paperwork mattered,” Peterson and Taylor write, “not because documents indexed social and political realities, but because they made bureaucracy work. Amin’s Uganda was a documentary regime in which the composition and management of identity cards, official letters, and other papers gave people leverage.”36 As a result of the “uniquely fallacious” nature of official archives produced during Amin’s time, they contend that much of the newly accessible source material is “unlikely to reveal new facts about the character of real life in Amin’s Uganda.”37 Thus, they both remind us that paperwork had an

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31 Akita, Development of the National Archives and the National Documentation Centre, 3.
32 Akita, Development of the National Archives and the National Documentation Centre, 1.
33 Akita, Development of the National Archives and the National Documentation Centre, 5–6.
34 Akita, Development of the National Archives and the National Documentation Centre, 11–14.
36 Peterson and Taylor, “Rethinking the State in Idi Amin’s Uganda,” 71.
37 Peterson and Taylor, “Rethinking the State in Idi Amin’s Uganda,” 73–74.
important if theatrical role despite the chaos and violence of the 1970s, while also highlighting how local officials used it to engage in Amin’s style of “government-by-exhortation.”

While there was thus a considerable output of routine paperwork in this period, silences are also apparent. In contrast to many postcolonial military regimes elsewhere, the documents of Uganda’s intelligence organizations are almost non-existent. Amin’s paramilitary organizations – such as the State Research Bureau or the Public Safety Unit – were involved in the monitoring of the population, yet no archives on their activities are available. Instead, information on these abuses comes mainly from first-hand accounts, whether in the form of oral histories collected by scholars; the testimonies in the *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights in Uganda*, which was published in 1994; and the material in the *Commission of Inquiry into the Disappearances of People in Uganda since 25 January 1971*, which was published in 1974. It is unclear whether the records of these paramilitary groups were destroyed as a precaution, if historians have simply not yet discovered them, or if they never existed in the first place. However, glimpses of these organizations’ activities can been found in a handful of files in the Central Police Station in Kampala. Here, in the day-to-day police reports, officers recorded citizens’ encounters with these groups. Through the pens of police officers, we learn about a family assaulted at their home by State Research Bureau agents for hiding Idi Amin’s photo, and a terrified shopkeeper who feared for his life as the State Research agents searched his store, likely looking for smuggled goods.

With this exception, however, the existing archival material does not tell us about the worst abuses in the 1970s. However, it allows us to see into a side of the Amin state that is rarely discussed, helping us to understand the quotidian workings of power and the everyday realities of Ugandans employed by the state. By examining these archives, we can finally begin to dissect the broad narratives of dysfunctionality that have characterized scholarship on the Amin years – and the postcolonial African state more generally – instead exploring how the state operated in practice.

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38 Peterson and Taylor, “Rethinking the State in Idi Amin’s Uganda,” 73.
While Peterson and Taylor’s work uses the archives of the Amin state to unpack the “social history of governmentality” in the 1970s, this article probes the social histories of a particular group of public servants, and how they are made legible within the archive. Read with a critical eye and alongside other sources, particularly oral histories, these documents can perhaps shed light on the “character of real life” in early postcolonial Uganda. Their primary value, however, lies beyond the question of truth or “real life.” Rather, it is the affective registers within these documents that are important, as they illuminate some of the anxieties, ambitions, and relationships of prison officers in the early postcolonial period. As Allman argues, it is this “human dimension” that is perhaps most intriguing the postcolonial archive. As the state is “far less involved” in shaping how and if documents are preserved, there is more space for “affect and sentiment, for emotion and desire,” she contends. By tracing these human histories, we can begin to complicate our images of public servants in the postcolony, seeing them as more than victims or agents of violent regimes.

The Uganda Prisons Service: A Brief Overview

As was the case across Sub-Saharan Africa, prisons were introduced to Uganda under colonial rule. While various forms of confinement were used as a means of punishment in Uganda’s precolonial communities, it was not until the arrival of the British that incarceration became a punishment on its own terms. The first prisons were set up by elites from Buganda – the most powerful precolonial kingdom and the primary partners of the British in consolidating colonial control – shortly after the kingdom became a protectorate in 1894. The Protectorate Government opened its own prisons in the late 1890s in Entebbe and Kampala, the major towns of colonial settlement. Along with the prisons run by Buganda Kingdom and the Protectorate Government, there was a third prison system operated by Uganda’s various “native” or local government authorities, which had been created as part of the indirect rule style of governance.

42 Peterson and Taylor, “Rethinking the State in Idi Amin’s Uganda,” 75.
43 Peterson and Taylor, “Rethinking the State in Idi Amin’s Uganda,” 74.
44 Allman, “Phantoms of the Archive,” 129.
46 Allman, “Phantoms of the Archive,” 129.
The Protectorate prison service, which became known as the Uganda Prisons Service, was the largest and most formalized of the three systems. It expanded steadily throughout the early colonial period. By 1912, there were sixteen Protectorate prisons of various sizes across the country, and in 1927, Luzira Prison was opened on the outskirts of Kampala. All of the most serious offenders were held at Luzira – including those transferred from Buganda or local government prisons – as well as European and Asian offenders. To this day, the Luzira prison complex – which includes Upper Prison, Edward’s site of employment in 1978 – remains the largest and most infamous penal site in the country.

For the first few decades of colonial rule, the Service had a very militaristic culture and was primarily punitive in its purpose. During the initial years of colonial rule, prison officers were drawn from the King’s African Rifles, the British-run regiment in East Africa. However, as the institutions of the colonial state began to specialize, the Service was placed under the authority of the Uganda Police Force in 1908. This did not alter the Service’s martial culture however, as the Police Force was also highly militarized, and maintained its own battalion until 1917. Thus, the Service’s origins were deeply intertwined with the military institutions of the colonial state. As a result, most officers had no specialized training in prison duties, and were expected to do little more than guard prisoners.

This militaristic culture began to shift in the interwar years. Following a series of reviews of the Service by metropolitan and internal observers in the 1930s, colonial officials sought to make UPS a more “modern” institution. It was separated from the Police Force, new senior ranks for educated Africans were introduced, and more specialized training was provided for all ranks. By the late colonial period, external observers had singled out...
Uganda as a regional leader in the creation of a professional cadre of African prison officers.\(^54\) Furthermore, the Service’s ethos was shifted from punitive to rehabilitative. This was especially evident in the creation of prison farms and the expansion of prison industries, which were intended to provide training opportunities for prisoners and also to serve as a source of government revenue.

The emphasis on professionalism continued after independence. Values such as adherence to rules, respect for colleagues, political neutrality, and the need for expertise were instilled through recruitment and training. Recruits were deliberately drawn from across the country, with education levels rather than ethnicity as the primary criterion for selection. This was in contrast to the practice for much of the colonial period, where the British had shown a preference for Northern Ugandans due to their alleged martial qualities. In the case of the Acholi, for example, colonial officials had believed that their “superior physique, habits of discipline, and unrefined outlook” made them ideal for policing, prisons, or military work.\(^55\) Once they were recruited, prison officers began a training process that lasted between six months to two years depending on their rank. In training, they not only participated in daily parades and drills, but also were instructed in basic principles of criminology and penology. All recruits lived at the Prisons Training School – located on the Luzira grounds – over the course of the training process, enabling them to forge bonds with their new colleagues and learn the Service’s core values. Some officers even had the opportunity to train abroad. Those at the rank of Cadet Assistant Superintendent of Prisons – the highest entry-level rank – were sent to England to participate in training with other officers from across the Commonwealth.\(^56\)

Amin’s coup profoundly disrupted this professionalization process, as UPS was deeply affected by the onset of military rule. As will be discussed below, it is difficult to trace the effects of this within official archives, thus making oral histories indispensable. When discussing the Amin years, many officers spoke about the death of their colleagues at the hands of paramilitary organizations. They recalled instances of State Research Bureau agents showing up on prison sites and removing officers, who were never to be seen again.\(^57\) Amin also introduced military personnel into the

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\(^{57}\) Interview with “William,” 22 August 2016; interview with “Isaac,” 30 May 2016.
Service’s ranks, and insisted that UPS officers serve in the war against Tanzania, thus blurring the lines between these two institutions yet again.58 Finally, UPS prisons became a holding ground for political prisoners, particularly those whose lives had been spared by the paramilitary organizations. Thus, prison officers were faced with difficult choices and increasing vulnerability in this period. Although much of this is absent from the archival record, the material available does reveal the more day-to-day concerns of prison officers and the social worlds that they inhabited.

The Archives of the Uganda Prisons Service

Within the Uganda Prisons Service, the past is both palpable and elusive. The architecture of the Service is where history is perhaps most visible, as many prison sites retain their colonial-era structures. Originally intended to be an impressive outpost of British power, they are now more notable for peeling paint and makeshift prison yards, particularly in rural areas. Continuities with the past are further apparent in officers’ uniforms, which mark them as members of a long tradition of public service. There are also many terrains of memory within UPS, with officers of varying generations articulating their own versions of the Service’s “golden age” and “dark days.”59

In terms of archives, however, the past is less accessible. A visit to the UPS headquarters, a labyrinthine building perched on the busy intersection of Dewinton Road and Parliament Avenue, yields little in the way of archival evidence. There is no central repository of the Service’s records, whether colonial or postcolonial. This is somewhat surprising given the centrality of paperwork to the Service’s operations. Documents were constantly being moved between different government offices and prison sites, from circulars issued by the Commissioner of Prisons to more routine forms of correspondence between officers. As was the case in most government institutions, the Service was required to produce detailed annual reports. Along with summarizing the scale and nature of the prisoner population, the reports noted issues related to staff welfare, changes to policies, and discussions of the professional development opportunities offered within the Service. Each individual officer had a personnel file, which traced his or her career from application to retirement or discharge. Paperwork was essential in the Service’s operations, yet much of this material is nowhere to be found.

One of the few archival sites in Kampala is the Prisons Training School library, which is still actively used by officers today. On the library’s shelves, colonial era prison files are placed next to criminology texts, while prison reports from other countries rest alongside the writings of British prison reformers. Some remnants of the Service’s history are available, such as a photo album documenting Prison Commissioner Fabian Okwaare’s tour of penal institutions in the United States and Canada in 1967. With over fifty photographs, the album illuminates some of the international influences on UPS in the 1960s, a time when it was trying to create new avenues for prisoner rehabilitation and position itself as a “modern” penal organization. Speaking in a nostalgic tone, an officer by the name of Luke recalled the former abundance of the library, the shelves of which had been carefully filled by him and his other senior colleagues through their travels abroad. The “stocking” of the library, he explained, was made possible through “my contact[s] and my colleagues’ contact in the world (...) through our connections we would get books donated.” However, the collection was apparently severely depleted in the aftermath of the Uganda-Tanzania War in the late 1970s, during which time many government institutions were looted. “If I went [today],” Luke remarked, “I would shed so many tears because so many of those books I participated in buying and stocking, they’re not there.” A folder containing book request forms – which included titles such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s This Time Tomorrow and George Sabine’s A History of Political Theory – further hint at the range of books that may have once filled the shelves.

The Service also keeps its personnel files. These are loosely organized chronologically, and are mainly used for human resources purposes – the likely reason for their preservation and relative organization. They offer a rich repository of social history, providing information on officers’ lives before joining the Service, families, relationships within UPS, and career trajectories. However, while each individual file yields valuable information, less than two dozen remain for officers whom worked in the 1960s and 1970s. The fate of the remaining files is unclear, but it is likely that they too were affected by wartime looting.

District archives also proved to be key repositories of UPS files. Although much of the district material focuses on local government prisons, there are still a large number of documents from the Service’s headquarters, as well as those discussing UPS district prisons in the region. These include circulars from the Commissioner of Prisons’ office, annual reports for district prisons, and banking records. 

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complaints from prisoners, and correspondence between officers across the country. Much of this information is absent from the Kampala-based archives, yet it has been preserved on the peripheries. The existence of these documents illuminates the capillaries of postcolonial bureaucracy, demonstrating how information moved from the capital to other parts of Uganda. It also reflects Peterson and Taylor’s arguments about the seriousness with which local government officials approached paperwork, carefully producing and circulating documents as they performed their bureaucratic roles.63

A number of files for the early postcolonial period can be found in the Africana Collection at Makerere University. Along with some recruitment pamphlets and incident reports, it holds the Service’s annual reports for the years 1964–1969 and 1973–1975. There are no other known copies of these reports, whether in the Prison Service or elsewhere. While it is unclear what happened to the missing reports, the available material provides valuable insight into the Service’s development over time. For historians of the postcolonial period, colonial documentary holdovers such as annual departmental reports are very instructive, allowing one to track changes from year-to-year and examine a department’s self-representation to a wider official audience.

Finally, newspapers are a very valuable source. Both the Uganda Argus and the Voice of Uganda – the main government papers in the 1960s and 1970s – have many stories on the Prisons Service. Both papers featured stories on presidential visits to UPS, promotions of senior officers, and major ceremonies involving the Service. Even more so than the annual reports, these media sources are useful for understanding how the Service was presented to an external readership. By examining how UPS is portrayed, we can better understand how Amin tied representations of the Service to his broader political goals.

Within these files, the “exhortatory propaganda” of the Amin state is at times obvious.64 This is particularly apparent in documents regarding Amin’s “keep Uganda clean” campaign. Introduced in 1973, this campaign was framed as an effort to clean up Uganda’s cities, but, as Decker has shown, it was also used to punish “subversive behaviour.”65 Prisoners and prison officers were expected to contribute to this collective effort. This was concretely spelled out in a letter from the District Commissioner of South Kigezi to the Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Ndorwa Government Prison in October 1978.66 As part of the preparations for the arrival of foreign

63 See: Peterson and Taylor, “Rethinking the State in Idi Amin’s Uganda.”
64 Peterson and Taylor, “Rethinking the State in Idi Amin’s Uganda,” 73.
delegates who were attending the celebrations for Uganda’s sixteenth anniversary of independence, Amin ordered that inmates clean up the White Horse Inn, Lake Bunyonyi Hotel, and the local hospital. It was expected, the district commissioner wrote, that this directive would be implemented “without delay.” Prison officers were also expected to uphold high standards of cleanliness at prisons. In a letter entitled “General Cleanliness at Hoima Central Prison,” the Officer-in-Charge urged the staff to “put vigour on this procedure of cleanliness so that we may see that we are matching (...) the appeal which was made of [sic] to ‘KEEP UGANDA CL[E]AN.’”

Although these files demonstrate the ways in which paperwork was used in an exhortatory manner, there are many documents that are more distant from these boisterous claims and orders. This is particularly evident in the personnel files, where letters between officers give voice to everyday concerns that persisted despite military rule. Rather than pledging their allegiance to Amin or demonstrating their involvement in his policies, officers instead write about their experiences of living with their colleagues and their anxieties about living apart from their families – themes to which we shall now turn.

Spaces of Home: Officers’ Social Worlds

Studies of prisoners in Africa and elsewhere have often focused on the unique social dynamics that animated spaces of incarceration. Much of this has been written in reference to nationalist movements. For example, Peter Zinoman’s work on prisoners in Indochina has demonstrated how the prison system fostered the growth of the Vietnamese Communist party. Within African historiography, scholars have examined the communities within Mau Mau detention camps, Robben Island, and the prisons of Rhodesia. Peterson’s work on Kenya, for example, has drawn our

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67 Kabale District Archive, Justice, Law, Order, Security 5, District Commissioner South Kigezi to Officer-in-Charge Nدورwa Government Prison.

68 Kabale District Archive, Justice, Law, Order, Security 5, District Commissioner South Kigezi to Officer-in-Charge Nدورwa Government Prison.

69 Hoima District Archives, John B. Senturo, Officer in Charge Prisons to No.12 Sgt/Warden E. Kyomba, the In-Charge Central Prison Hoima, 21 January 1974


attention to the ways in which Mau Mau detainees engaged in a “range of intellectual and moral projects” that were not narrowly defined by their experience of violence in the camps.\(^{72}\) Through activities such as writing letters to their families and communities, creating associations and newspapers, and keeping diaries, detainees were involved in “generating knowledge and making claims on others.”\(^{73}\) Peterson’s work is not only significant for the insight it provides into detainees’ social histories, but also because it challenges the view that detainees were made “socially dead” as a result of the violence that they suffered.\(^{74}\) This emphasis on the brutality of the camps, as well as the depiction of the Mau Mau Rebellion as a “straightforward struggle between the two sides,” reduces the experiences of the detainees, he argues, to a narrow range of “stereotyped political choices.”\(^{75}\)

Similar stereotypes have persisted in historical renderings of prison officers, who usually appear only to add ballast to arguments about the violence and corruption within penal systems. The social worlds of prison officers – both within their spaces of work and in regards to their families – have been almost entirely unstudied. As mentioned, prison officers in Uganda generally lived at prison sites, which were usually far away from their places of origin. Living apart from their families in areas that were unfamiliar to them, the prison site was often the primary social world and space of interaction for officers. Officers socialized in a variety of common and residential spaces, played on sports teams or in musical groups together, went to church services, and fell in love. Although many officers embraced this environment, others – like Edward – struggled to manage their home lives. Conscious of their role as providers, officers were often anxious about ensuring adequate material and moral support for loved ones. In their correspondence, officers often expressed a sense of duty and feelings of shame regarding their relationships to their families, and their concern about being unable to manage their household or provide sufficient resources – burdens that were, in some cases, made more difficult by the realities of military rule. This section explores these two spaces of home, as well as how they are positioned and presented within archives.

To do this, it turns mainly to the personnel files. In many ways, these files are inconsistent. While some folders are filled with information from various stages of an officer’s career, others have only a loose sheet of paper or two. Edward’s file, for example, contains two documents: his application form, and the letter requesting a transfer. However, there are also some commonalities across files, which contain at least one of several types of documents: applications to join the service, performance reviews, records of disciplinary proceedings, petitions to avoid dismissal, and transfer requests.

\(^{73}\) Peterson, “The Intellectual Lives of Mau Mau Detainees,” 75.
\(^{74}\) Peterson, “The Intellectual Lives of Mau Mau Detainees,” 75.
\(^{75}\) Peterson, “The Intellectual Lives of Mau Mau Detainees,” 75.
While telling us about the bureaucratic machinery and operations of the Service, they also provide glimpses into prison officers’ personal lives. In application forms, for example, prospective recruits were asked to state their ethnicity, age, place of birth, religion, level of education, present occupation, marital status, and number of children. The reviewing officer could also note points of interest when commenting on the suitability of an applicant, providing further hints about officers’ personal lives. For example, on the form for Anne, who applied to be a wardress in 1964, the officer noted that her father was a headmaster of a Church of Uganda primary school, perhaps as a way of suggesting that she came from a family of good standing.\(^7^6\)

These personnel files – along with official reports, newspaper articles, and several other types of documents – also provide insight into the collective life of officers within the Service, especially those that deal with staff welfare. Within a few decades of the Service’s founding, officers’ welfare had become a matter of official concern. The first mention of this issue appears in the 1926 Annual Report on H.M. Prison Kampala, where it was noted that prison staff were being overworked, leaving them with “little time for recreation or personal affairs.”\(^7^7\) As the Service began to professionalize in the late colonial period – and the Colonial Office became increasingly preoccupied with the welfare its subjects more generally – officers’ wellbeing became a more prominent focus. In 1940, a staff recreation hall was opened at Luzira, and welfare committees were introduced at different prison sites beginning in 1957.\(^7^8\) Echoes of this rhetoric continued into the Amin years. In his first year in power, Amin himself appeared at the opening ceremony for a recreation hall at Moroto Prison. In the official coverage of the event, the Argus noted Amin’s presence and emphasized that such facilities were built so as to “enable officers to enjoy social and cultural activities so that they can feel at home in remote areas like Moroto.”\(^7^9\) It was hoped that such facilities would improve officers’ wellbeing in Moroto and other locations across the country, as the Service recognized that “a physically and mentally distressed officer cannot be expected to live up to the demands of his duties.”\(^8^0\)


\(^7^9\) “Prison Social Hall Opened,” Uganda Argus, 3 August 1971, 1.

Sport was one of the most popular sources of leisure for prison staff. The Service heavily promoted participation in athletic activities, as it enhanced officers’ physical health and fitness while also encouraging qualities such as the ability to work in a team, leadership, and discipline. The Service had a number of sporting clubs that participated in competitions with similar clubs from the police, the military, and other professional groups. Football was one of the most popular sports, and the UPS team – known as the “Maroons” – regularly topped the league table. Prison Service athletes also participated in other sports, including boxing, basketball, swimming, judo, netball, and athletics. The achievements of UPS clubs and athletes were regularly trumpeted in the annual reports. The section on sport in the 1967 report, for example, opened by declaring that “Performances in the sporting field have been outstanding,” before going on to list the accomplishments of specific athletes at the Africa Cup of Nations, national athletics competition, and on the National Boxing Team, as well as “local successes in sports” that were “too numerous to mention.” The prominence of sport in the archives suggests its importance within the Service’s institutional culture, as it not only encouraged desired physical and social qualities, but also provided officers with an opportunity to serve their nation on a world stage.

Along with structured activities, the consumption of alcohol was one of the most common sources of relaxation for prison officers. Many officers drank in the recreation halls on prison grounds, but they were also permitted to go to “private clubs” in the towns. While the Standing Orders do not provide a specific definition of a “private club,” the term suggests a respectable place in which to consume alcohol, one that was deemed


appropriate for professionals. If officers did go to public bars, they were discouraged from wearing their uniform, as this did not reflect “any credit on the individual or the Service.”\(^{85}\) Despite these guidelines, excessive drinking was a regular issue amongst prison officers: numerous disciplinary reports include charges of intoxication while on duty. Thus, while the Service recognized the importance of alcohol as a source of leisure, it sought to ensure that officers consumed it in a way that was appropriate for their professional status. As Justin Willis has explored, there was considerable debate about how to encourage respectable drinking in postcolonial period, as various postcolonial governments sought to promote a drinking culture that fit with official visions of modernity.\(^{86}\) Professionals and public servants were expected to drink bottled beer and spirits that were produced in the formal economy, as they were “taxed, uniform, and clean,” and thereby suitable for those with “status in and through the state.”\(^{87}\)

Officers also socialized with one another in their living quarters. At larger prison sites such as Luzira, officers were sometimes able to bring their families along, but most of them lived with their colleagues. Posted far away from their home communities in order to ensure neutrality, officers thus turned to one another for companionship. This comes out particularly clearly in interviews. As an officer by the name of Benjamin remarked: “We were all friends, we work[ed] together. (…) In fact, I don’t think whether there is any ministry or any department which people would love (…) each other like prisons. There isn’t. This is a really complete family. A family more than your own family.”\(^{88}\) This sense of camaraderie is harder to trace in the archives, but does show up occasionally. Within the personnel files, for example, there are a few mentions of wardresses “taking tea” and chatting on the verandas of their houses.\(^{89}\)

Prisons were also spaces of romantic relationships. It was not uncommon for officers to become involved in intimate relationships with individuals living in communities around the prison site. Far away from their families, such relationships likely provided a source of comfort. Traces of these romances are difficult to find in official archives and often inappropriate to bring up in interviews. A few examples appear in the commission of inquiry that examined the disappearances of Ugandans, specifically through

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\(^{87}\) Willis, “‘Clean Spirit,’” 85.

\(^{88}\) Interview with “Benjamin,” 29 July 2016.

the testimonies of prison officers’ wives. Aware of their husbands’ extra-marital relationships, they reached out to these other women in order to try and locate the missing men. In these testimonies, we learn about officers such as Bob, a principal officer at the Prisons Training School who had six children with his wife, herself a prison officer, and three additional children with his “girlfriend,” and Okomi, who lived with his mistress in the prison barracks while his wife raised the children in a nearby village.90

In some cases, close relationships between male and female warders were frowned upon. This is illustrated by a disciplinary case involving Elizabeth, who had joined the Service around the time of Amin’s coup. In 1975, Elizabeth found herself facing dismissal for having stolen six sheet of asbestos from the prison store.91 The case was taken very seriously, not only because of the gravity of the offence, but also because Elizabeth had carried out the theft with a male warder. The officer presiding over the case seemed to be particularly appalled that a woman had acted in this way. In the short judgment on the case, no more than a paragraph, this connivance between a male and female officer was mentioned twice. First, the officer explained that he viewed the case as “grave,” because “the accused had the courage to do what she did in the company with a male companion.” Closing the statement, the officer continued: “I have taken into account the fact that the accused who is a woman put herself in the company of men and did this deed.” Thus, it seems that Elizabeth’s offence was abhorrent because she had transgressed certain gendered expectations. Perhaps colluding with men suggested that she was engaging in relationships deemed to be inappropriate, or maybe it was viewed as a bid for greater power. In her appeal, Elizabeth also foregrounded her gender, but in this case portrayed herself as a struggling mother rather than a deviant woman. She insisted that she had been “misled” by a male warder who had asked him to help with “bringing his things home,” thus accidently aiding in the theft. Elizabeth begged to remain in her position, citing her need to care for her children. “Sincerely speaking, my joining the Prison Service was due to the difficulties I was undergoing,” she wrote. “I joined the Service so as to enable me to care for my children since I am their mother and father as well,” Elizabeth explained. Continuing, she wrote, “if at all I am discharged or dismissed from the Service (…) how will I bring the six children I have got to life, so far there are four of them at school without the help of anybody, my parents are now aged and that they [sic] can hardly


91 All quotes in this paragraph are from: Uganda Prisons Service Headquarters Archive, Uganda Prisons Record of Conduct and Service of “Elizabeth,” “Petition on the Irregular Conduct,” 22 September 1975.
help to bring up my children.” While there is no record of the eventual decision regarding Elizabeth’s future in UPS, her letter illuminates some of the ways in which the contact between and conduct of officers was a matter of official concern.

As Elizabeth’s appeal suggests, officers did not always live together in harmony. Files on disciplinary proceedings reveal many cases involving accusations of gossip, threats, and even physical assault. For example, Anne wrote a letter to the Commissioner of Prisons in 1972 in order to explain the “misunderstanding” which “came between” her and her Officer-in-Charge.92 Tensions had begun, she claimed, after she was allotted a house on the prison site that the OC had wanted to give to “another wardress,” intimating that he had particular favorites amongst the staff.93 “I did not vacate the house,” Anne wrote, “and from there we were not in good terms.”94 She elaborated further, discussing that the OC had gotten another wardress to pass information along to him regarding Anne’s “behavior” and was accusing her of “backbiting him in the staff quarters.”95 Accusations of untrustworthiness and gossip are common in the files, suggesting the Service’s concern with creating a collegial environment. Senior officers criticized those staff members who appeared to be dishonest. For example, an officer by the name of Paul was characterized as a “slippery snake” and a “crook” in one evaluation form, leading the reviewing officer to conclude that he was “a thorn in the disciplinary service.”96

While officers sometimes struggled to live together, one of their biggest challenges was living away from their families. The Standing Orders for UPS stated that all officers were “always liable to transfer and that the exigencies of the Service must override any purely domestic considerations,” and reminded officers that getting married would not affect where they were placed.97 These policies were tied to broader visions of public service taking shape in the early postcolonial period. At a rhetorical level, Amin urged government employees to be loyal to the nation above all. In one of his first speeches to prison officers, he implored the UPS leadership to “see that there is no tribalism or politics practiced in the Department” and


demanded that all officers should “work very hard to bring people together” – approaches that were not often reflected in Amin’s own policies. He continued this refrain throughout his presidency, reminding officers that they need to work in harmony in order to correct the nation’s deviant citizens. At a passing out ceremony for prison officers in March of 1972, Amin reinforced this message. “A tax-payer who has sponsored you on this course expects much from you,” he commented. “And in return,” he told them, “you must give them assistance, show them a spirit of tolerance, courtesy and patience; be of good conduct and behaviour whenever you are dealing with them.” Amin cautioned them against corruption and political motives, remarking that these were the “worst diseases” in Uganda. Senior officers also reminded prison staff of the importance of service to the nation. In a speech to prison officers in November of 1974, Commissioner of Prisons George Ssentamu urged officers to stop requesting transfers to other districts. As recounted by the Voice of Uganda, Sstenamu reminded the officers that in order to ensure “the smooth running of government,” civil servants should not always work in their home district. Rather than trying to work near to their homes, Ssentamu urged the officers to “love Uganda and forget tribalism.”

In some cases, officers leveraged this kind of rhetoric when seeking to advance their careers. Noah, a civilian officer in UPS, presented himself as a model employee in letters to his superiors. Writing to apply for a new post within UPS, he not only provided a long list of educational credentials, but also positioned himself as a true citizen of the nation. “[I] have widely travelled all over Uganda and I can speak and understand well the following languages: Jopadhola, Lusoga, Luganda, Lunyoro, Acholi (all Luo), Swahili and English,” he wrote. In his five years in UPS, Noah had worked in at least three prisons, including in remote Northern regions of the country. He had also requested to do further training in neighboring Kenya. While it is unclear from the existing archival material whether or not Noah had a family, he seemed willing to move around and outside of Uganda in order to pursue his career goals.

99 “Kigonya New Prisons Chief.”
100 “Kigonya New Prisons Chief.”
101 “Kigonya New Prisons Chief.”
103 “Ssentamu Calls for Patriotism.”
However, for many officers, these expectations of mobility were difficult to meet. To try and elicit sympathy from their superiors in the hopes of obtaining a transfer, officers presented themselves as providers and caretakers, grounding themselves in networks of relationships. In some cases, these narratives were highly gendered. Male officers often discussed their responsibilities to look after their families, especially ailing parents or younger siblings. Derek, who was working in a remote area in Eastern Uganda, requested a transfer to his home district due in 1977 to the “problems pressing me at home.”

Having lost his father while he was training as a recruit, his mother now had “nobody to support her at home except my self [sic].” With four younger brothers, Derek wrote, “paying school fees and all necessary support at home is on me.” For Jeremiah, who had joined the Prisons Service in the late 1950s, the death of his parents prompted him to request a transfer to a station near to his home in Eastern Uganda for the first time in his career. “I have lost all my parents who have been helping me to keep my home together with my family,” he wrote in May 1976. “Now the home is without any one to keep even my children who are at school, they are now staying together with my aunt who she is also reached the state of death.” His house had “reached to the state of col[l]apsing,” and as a result, his wife was “threatening to leave my home and children because of home problems.”

While male officers often presented themselves as providers for an extended family of dependents, female officers usually foregrounded their precarious position as mothers who lacked paternal support. Writing in 1976, Anne requested a transfer to Masindi so as to enable her child to attend a good school. She explained how her son “had been with his father,” but due to “problems of detention,” the father could no longer provide care, nor could his wife, who had “died in a motor accident.” As there was now “no proper person” to look after her son, Anne explained that he had to come and live with her. However, there were “no proper schools” near her current station in Western Uganda; thus she needed to be moved to another prison in a larger town.

Although Anne’s request was granted, there were also times when such problems were met with little sympathy. Grace, who had joined the Service in 1974, protested against her transfer to a prison in Pallisa given its remote nature, which would likely make it difficult to attend to “domestic problems.”¹¹³ Denying her request, the Provincial Commissioner of Prisons wrote, “almost everybody has a problem of one kind or the other. If we are to consider each and every ones [sic] problems there would be no transfers.”¹¹⁴ Faced with this stringent line, some officers simply left UPS. For example, following the disappearance of Helen – a wardress posted in Moroto – her senior officer suggested that “she had been talking of marriage, resignation and transfer back to Kampala.”¹¹⁵

In his letter to the Commissioner of Prisons, Edward evoked not only his position within his family, but also drew on the discourse of welfare used by the Prisons Service. He presented himself as barely coping, writing about the problems “encircling” him at his current station.¹¹⁶ While Edward did not elaborate on these, he suggests that such problems were negatively impacting his “personal welfare and health,” and thereby his duties. Edward presented a transfer as the only solution, explaining that he would then be able to carry out his work “with ease.” Although there are no other examples of this in the material available, Edward’s letter suggests that officers were aware of the Service’s emphasis on welfare, and that this discourse could be leveraged to secure transfers.

These concerns – whether providing a house for one’s family, looking after children, or attending to aging parents – were by no means new to prison officers. While these types of letters are even more difficult to come by in the colonial archives, snippets do emerge. For example, UPS found itself dealing with a crisis in 1957 after a group of *askaris* – the term used for prison officers at local government prisons – went on strike to protest their low salaries and poor living conditions. As a result, UPS had to take over this local government prison. In their petition, the *askaris* articulated their struggles to meet the needs of their families. Writing about their salary, they exclaimed: “How will it suffice clothing our families, to pay school fees for our children, and meet costs of supporting our relatives at home from

¹¹⁶ All quotes in this paragraph are from: Uganda Prisons Service Headquarters Archive, Uganda Prisons Record of Conduct and Service of “Edward,” “Application for Transfer to Western Province,” 3 July 1978.
where you brought us?” Edward’s letter in 1978 echoes many written in the late 1950s and 1960s, as officers requested transfers to try to better meet the needs of their families in times of distress, death or economic hardship. For example, Albert, who had begun his service in the late colonial period, requested a transfer to his home district in February of 1966. His parents were “growing old and weak,” and as the “only son,” Albert explained, “they need my help.” Furthermore, his family had “no house to live in,” and they thus required his presence to “go and make [a] house for them.” Such fundamental concerns about how to provide for one’s family were thus pressing for prison officers across generations, although they were altered and at times intensified by the political and economic situations of the particular period in which they worked.

While it is not often made explicit in the archives, these common struggles were likely impacted by Amin’s military rule. In case the case of Sampson, the impact of the Amin regime on his family life is clearly articulated. There is no personnel file available on Sampson; he is instead introduced to us in a letter written in September 1979 from the District Commissioner of Kabale to the Commissioner of Prisons, stored in the Kabale District Archive. Sampson, it seems, had turned to the District Commissioner to seek support for his transfer request. Intervening on Sampson’s behalf, the District Commissioner explained that Sampson “has been enjoying his work at Soroti” and insisted “Soroti is not a bad station and that he likes it,” thereby presenting him as a dutiful public servant. However, Sampson wished to be transferred to the Kabale area “because of a lot of family problems requiring his physical presence from time to time.” Specifically, the violence engendered by the Uganda-Tanzania War and its immediate aftermath had made Sampson’s family’s situation untenable. In addition to looking after “his aging parents,” Sampson also needed to provide for “the five children left by his two brothers who were killed by Amin’s soldiers.” Appealing for sympathy, the District Commissioner concluded that Sampson had “genuine reasons” for requesting the transfer and suggested that his request should be “entertained and granted.” Sampson’s decision to turn to the District Commissioner suggests both the desperation of his situation, and also his awareness of the importance of official endorsement. By involving the head of his district government, Sampson situated himself as a member of the Kabale community, positioning the

117 Jinja District Archives (JDA) 4:6, “Complaint from Employees at Bufulubi,” 3 October 1957, 1.

118 All quotes in this paragraph are from: Uganda Prisons Service Headquarters Archive, Record of Conduct and Service of “Albert,” “Re: Application for Transfer,” 3 February 1966.

welfare of himself and his family as a matter of official concern. While Sampson’s request is the only example to involve an interlocutor beyond the Prisons Service, it is likely that other officers sought out these sources of external support.

The archives of the UPS thus provide a window in the ways in which officers lived with one another and also tried to manage living apart from their families. From these files, we can get a glimpse of officers’ daily interactions, living situations, forms of leisure, and family dynamics. Paperwork did not simply serve as a place to record the Service’s operations, but was also strategically used by officers for a variety of purposes. Through letters, appeals, and reports, officers could air grievances against colleagues, assert their commitment to public service, perform particular gender roles, and try to assert their importance as providers.

Conclusion

Historians have long been fascinated with the “phantoms,” “paper cadavers,” and “spectres” whose lives are at once rendered legible yet remain elusive in archival spaces. In a postcolonial context, where political turmoil, conflict, and acute budgetary constraints have made archival preservation difficult, tracking down these figures can be particularly daunting. However, this “human dimension” of the archive that can help complicate portrayals of the postcolony by illuminating the range of choices, concerns, aspirations, and identities of postcolonial citizens.

By turning our attention to the histories of prison officers and their archival afterlives, this article offers three main contributions. First, it reminds us to situate public servants as “social actors.” Despite working in the “coercive trades” of the state, prison officers’ worlds were shaped by a range of relationships and responsibilities. Rather than seeing these actors solely as Amin’s agents, we can instead use the archives to better understand how they operated as colleagues and caregivers. Living alongside one another on the prison grounds, they often forged close bonds with other officers, creating a close-knit atmosphere that provided comfort in times of hardship. They also, however, continued to try and manage their home lives from afar, despite the many challenges posed by the logistical requirements of their career and the political conditions in which they

121 Allman, “Phantoms of the Archive,” 129.
worked. Officers’ experiences in this period were in part shaped by military rule, as longstanding struggles of how to provide for one’s family while working in a government service were made more complicated by the violence, economic disarray, and insecurity of the Amin state.

Secondly, this case illuminates the ways in which paperwork – like the gift-giving explored in Alison Bennett’s article or the historical writings of Lacito Okech discussed by Patrick Otím124 – served as an important arena of negotiation for public servants. Documents were not just spaces in which to perform loyalty to the state or inflate one’s sense of importance to a wider official audience. Like the Jonam ethnic patriots in Adrian Browne’s article, prison officers used documents strategically, inserting their personal lives into official matters and appealing to the sympathies of their superiors by reminding them of their most basic struggle to support their families. Whether positioning themselves as mothers, sons, siblings, or members of a local community, prison officers drew on their constellations of relationships in an effort to make their requests heard within the Service. While the archival files do not always give us a fulsome account of officers’ careers or home lives, they do provide insight into the ways in which these two spheres overlapped and at times sat in uneasy tension with one another.

Finally, these archives and the stories they contain open up new avenues for thinking about the postcolonial state. The archives of the Prisons Service do not simply yield social histories of public servants, but also of the wider state itself. By tracing the lives of prison officers, we are reminded that state institutions were places where people worked and in some cases lived, pursued various ambitions, forged and fractured relationships, and tried to find ways to support their loved ones. Avenues for sociability were often profoundly political: officers’ leisure activities, living situations, and family dynamics were all shaped by official ideas about what a public servant should and should not be, and, by extension, visions of the postcolonial state. Through tracing these human stories in official archives, we can better understand the postcolonial state and its institutions as sites of lived experience where aspirations, disappointments, and intimate dramas played out against the backdrop of postcolonial politics.

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