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The Bahima

The Bahima people of Southern Uganda, from its first encounter with the British colonial state, have demonstrated the contradictions inherent in its policy of indirect rule and the theories of state underpinning it. The Bahima were nomadic pastoralists with herds numbering in the hundreds, from which it produced quantities of milk, butter, and meat enough to support a gendered division of labor without agriculture. The first recorded encounters between the Bahima and the British, published in vast exploratory surveys, remarked on the physical characteristics of the Bahima—tall, slender frames; thin noses; and light skin—as evidence of their being a colonizing Nilo-Hamitic people. Indeed, John Speke, on his famed excursion to the source of the Nile, went as far as to assert the Bahima considered themselves a colonizing race of foreigners, with the "reigning kings [retaining] a singular traditional account of their having once been half white and half black" (Speke, 1868: 242). These first records also highlighted the customs of the Bahima, which, the British believed, made them particularly adaptable to indirect rule. These early ethnographers noted that the Bahima considered the land on which they grazed their herds of little value, placing stock, rather, in the number of their stocks. James Meldon, a captain on the Abyssinia-Uganda expedition, remarked that the Muhima man is "born in apathy and listlessness, goes through life calm and unruffled, and nothing…can shake him of his self-sufficient complacency…work is out of the question, the only form of occupation he will undertake is looking after cattle" (Malden, 1907: 141). This view of the Bahima—rooted in the "bovine mystique," to borrow a phrase from Lesotho scholarship—emphasized their irrational relationship to their herds and their seemingly supernatural ability to extract value from their irrational husbandry. John Roscoe, another early ethnographer, noted that "should a (Bahima man's) favorite cow die, their grief is extreme, and cases are not wanting in which

men have committed suicide through excessive grief at the loss of an animal" (Roscoe, 1915: 104). The excesses of this grief, its lack of economic motivation, as it were, is the object of inquiry here.

What emerges from this early ethnographic literature is a fixation with, and even a reverence for, the colonizing and extractive abilities of the Bahima and a concomitant repudiation of their illogical mode of production. Indeed, by the time of his writing, Roscoe observed the colonial state had begun its great project of indirect rule by landed chiefdom, the "encroachment of European influence on (the Bahima's) once secluded domain, every year witnessing a corresponding disintegration of their ancient customs and beliefs" (Roscoe, 1915: vi). This disintegration was only an object of anthropological anxiety: Roscoe hoped to record these practices before they eventually gave way to more rational ones. However, by hoping to create a record of these dynamic practices, in effect, by instantiating an *histoire événementielle*, Roscoe demonstrated the inherent contradiction of the colonial state: its simultaneous desire to make colonized subjects, mired in the realm of custom, and modern citizens.

Later accounts of the Bahima, produced years into the administration of the British protectorate, noted with frustration that, much like the cattle-herding Lesotho, Bahima cattle herding practices had not developed a rational, commodity form. H.F. Morris, a former colonial commissioner of the Bahima-ruled Ankole kingdom remarked:

> "the majority of the Bahima…have been almost completely unaffected by modern ways and thought. Unable through their lack of education, and indeed unwilling to play any part in the administration of the district, they pay little heed to their chief's extortive to improve their standard of life, or to educate their families…[Cattle] often mean more to them than the members of their family…[To increase the herds is their] main purpose in life…[They are] still instinctively nomadic and…constantly on the move in pursuit of fresh pasture" (Morris, 1964: 10-11, 64).

The Bahima, therefore, embodied the Minogue Paradox quite directly. In the years between Speke's expedition and Morris's lamentation, the Bahima had retained, if not entrenched, their "customary" practices, resisting efforts to modernize their industry and their way of being in the world. The experience of the Bahima people under the colonial state, therefore, demonstrates the contradiction

inherent at the heart of the colonial state: its propensity to create partial citizens and partial subjects. A critical analysis of the experience of the Bahima, therefore, enables one to observe the shortcomings of Weberian, Marxist, and post-structuralist understandings of the colonial state, all of which posit that the state, as either instrument of capital or a system of capillary discipline, created a uniform system of subjection. The Bahima demonstrate that the colonial encounter was one far more complicated, producing an incoherent power structure and forms of resistance thereof, leading to the colonial state's eventual demise.

Each of these perspectives on the colonial state explains some, but not all, of the experience of Bahima under colonization. I'll spend less time on the Weberian conception of the state because of its hegemony among others and its self-evident character in the way British colonial agents conceived of their work. It is evident, in the ethnographic interests and aspirations of the colonial agents that they saw themselves as serving the four functions of the Weberian colonial state: "discovery, pacification, commerce, and rational administration" (Comaroff, 1998: 324). That the colonial state regarded the Bahima with the wonderment of the dark continent is clear; that these conceptions of the Bahima were essentially attempts to re-present to Europe an objective or object-driven way of being in the world will become clearer through investigation. One can observe this mode of discovery in the description of Bahima diplomacy in Meldon's account. He remarks of the Bahima practice of "blood-brotherhood:"

> "The custom of blood-brotherhood (omukago) has existed from the earliest times among the Bahima. The contracting parties made an incision in the abdomen, the blood is caught on a leaf, and a little milk spilt on the hand of each. The blood is then mixed with the milk on the other's palm, and drunk…The obligations entailed are that the country of the each shall be free to the other in every way, even to sending cattle to graze, and if one of the parties makes war he can expect help from the other" (Meldon, 1907: 247).

Here one observes all four of the colonial mandates at work. This officializing view of a diplomatic practice focused on its irrationality and constitutive relationship to tribal violence. The colonial

record, by describing this practice, sought to *order* this irrational behavior, both in the sense of bounding and defining it. This official anthropology was in in service of the establishment of distinct polities (tribes) with rational economic relations facilitated by the Pax Britannica. Implicit in Roscoe's analysis is the violent, disordered pre-colonial.

Of course, bound up in this colonial mandate was the creation of ordered economies directed by the demand for cash crops in the metropole. Marxist analyses of the sedentarization of the Bahima focus on this mode of extraction as the productive activity which the colonial state existed to perpetuate. Mahmood Mamdani explained this narrative compellingly in *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda*:

> "Bunyoro was divided into a cattle-keeping pastoral aristocracy (the Hima) and a grain-cultivating class of agricultural serfs (the Iru). This was not simply a division of labor, with status distinctions between the two; it was a class division, in which the pastoral aristocracy appropriated a large share of the surplus produced by the agricultural serfs in the form of tribute…In Nkore, where the society had been undergoing a transformation from a caste to a class structure, colonial rule served to rigidify the 'traditional' caste distinction between the 'aristocratic' Hima and the 'common' Iru by appointing only Hima individuals to public office" (Mamdani, 1976: 28, 34).

By tracing this history, Mamdani suggests that the Hima were a pre-colonial feudal society, extracting value from the Beiru people not unlike the feudal lords of pre-capitalist Europe. Mamdani utilizes this materialist understanding to trace the development of a colonial administration by the indirect rule of Bahima chiefs who were sedentarized by the parceling of land and the establishment of rents. The colonial state figures in Mamdani's analysis as the functional apparatus of this economic extraction. Indeed, Mamdani asserts that this extraction took the superstructural form of a political process while in fact functioning to make capitalist economies. He recounts that the colonial administration "[objected] to…the existence of a parasitic landed gentry totally divorced from production and appropriating its share of the surplus as rent, not a capitalist landed class that would itself supervise and manage production, appropriating its share of the economic surplus not as rent but as *profit*" (Mamdani, 2975: 129). This distinction, between pre-capitalist land-*lord*ship and

capitalist agricultural management, is, for Mamdani, a material one at the heart of the colonial state's project for the pastoral Bahima. However, Mamdani's analysis demonstrates is own contradiction. He asserts that the feudal extraction of the Bahima of the Beiru's labor was reified by colonial policy as a means to develop capitalist land management in service of profit. Yet, the colonial record, which shows the limited success of this process, demonstrates that the Bahima were never transitioned into a landed capitalist class. While, it did select its indirect rulers from among the Bahima royal elites, the colonial administration was entirely unsuccessful in convincing the Bahima to give up their precolonial mode of production. Further, the form of the colonial state and its rhetoric was always bound up in the process not only of modernizing the mode of production but also of changing the Bahima's relationship to their cattle, which were, in fact, their main mode of subsistence. The British were concerned not only by the mode of extraction but by its culture. Thus, when he laments that the Bahima have been reticent to send their children to school, H. F. Morris vocalizes the colonial anxiety surrounding the Bahima's resistance to their project of discipline. Of course the greatest shortcoming of this Marxist reading of the colonial state is that the Bahima's habituation to European ways of understanding and production were extremely unsuccessful. Anecdotally, my grandmother's mother, Zelda, continued grazing her herds nomadically until the 1990s. She faced fines and sanction from private landlords and state officials, and her insistence on maintaining her practice amounted to a form of resistance to the colonial state's intervention into her mode of production *and* life. Indeed, when my grandmother built her a rectilinear house, Zelda built a hut outside and continued to live with her cattle.

A Foucauldian reading of the Bahima's encounter with the colonial state enables one to observe this process of social transformation through the lens of its capillary form and its theological ends. Mamdani's account of the Bahima's experience of coloniality assumes that the Bahima related to their cattle as capital from which value was extracted. If Mamdani doesn't say this

explicitly, his description of the Bahima as a pastoral aristocracy assumes this mode of production to be a feudal exploitative one. Hidden behind this understanding of the cattle is an assumption that Marxists share with their liberal counterparts: the object form. For Mamdani and, indeed, all previous historians of colonial capital, the object world was set apart from the human interiority, a sphere of separation that allowed the commodity form to take its meaning. Timothy Mitchell's *Colonising Egypt* made the compelling case that this object-form was the content of the colonial state's intervention into indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world:

> "The person was now thought of as something set apart from a physical world, like the visitor to an exhibition or the worker attending a machine, as the one who observes and controls it. His own nature…was realised in being 'industrious'—in maintaining the same steady observation and control over his own physical body and will" (Mitchell, 1998: 19).

Recall, here, Roscoe's observation of the Bahima's "extreme" grief at the loss of its cattle. By this standard of object-ness, such action would seem outside the realm of rational exploitation of the material world. If, however, one assumes the Bahima understood their existence in the world, their subjectivity, as deeply imbricated in the lives of their cattle, the extremity of suicide becomes less evident. Thus, when the colonial anthropologist records the Bahima's practice, he is ordering the world in two senses: by making legible a practice and people and by ordering the world into individuals with subjectivities and capacities within an objective object world. However, this project was incoherent. While the Bahima were shepherded into missionary schools, forced to establish title to their land, and gradually crowded out of common pasture, they were also "tribalized," thus reifying their "customary" practices into conditions of their existence. John Comaroff's intervention into Foucaldian understandings of the colonial state is apt here: the Bahima were at once meant to become modern citizens and customary subjects. Therefore, the Bahima practice of pastoral nomadism becomes a fraught mode by which resistances can be mobilized, limited by the very fact of Bahimaness being a colonial product.

The Bahima were never sedentarized. Their descendants have populated the kingdom of Buganda and other nearby kingdoms, often because of the restrictions on mobility imposed by colonial policy. They entered the colonial administration in great numbers and replicated their practices across a broad swathe of Uganda. Of course, this was always the custom: even early anthropologists noted the tendency of the Bahima to marry into other nations and join their aristocracy. This incomplete process of social transformation demonstrates the incoherent, cacophonous voice of the colonial state (state, here, in the sense of stating and statism). Any theory of the colonial state that cannot account for this cacophony, therefore, is incomplete, and a better understanding of the Bahima's experience with colonialism enables a useful intervention into the three dominant theories of the state, all of which posit the state as a uniform entity.

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