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Keeping culture clean: 'nested redistribution' as a path to moral redemption in Kampala (Uganda)

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ABSTRACT

The restoration of precolonial authorities in contemporary Uganda has inspired the revival of practices constitutive of local identities. The article focuses on the role of (re)distribution in the formation of Ganda identity in the Buganda kingdom, by exploring the moral conundrums lived by workers in Kisekka Market (Kampala). The article describes two principles underpinning economic relations. First, it explores culturally approved patronage and downwards distribution which, given the pyramidal structure of society, translates simultaneously into forms of redistribution and the upward submission of subjects to a higher order (clans and kingdom). This two-way process is called 'nested redistribution'. Second, it shows how culturally approved forms of (re)distribution conflict with individual accumulation, culturally condemned but paradoxically key to afford redistribution itself. The ethnography describes how tensions between these principles are resolved, making use of the same categories (culture, morality) that engender them in the first place.

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With the 1995 Constitution, Uganda restored several precolonial institutions that had been abolished after independence. Deprived of any political role, the restored kingdoms and chiefdoms represent today a symbolic and cultural reference for ethnic groups across the country. With the restoration came an intense revival of practices considered constitutive of local 'cultures' and 'traditions'. This article focuses on the role of (re)distribution practices for identity-formation in Buganda, a kingdom constituted by more than fifty patrilineal clans, presided by a king, in central Uganda.¹ The ethnography is set in Kisekka Market in Kampala, capital of both Uganda and Buganda.

Two principles of Ganda 'culture' are particularly relevant to this special issue. The first is the logic of client-patron relations, which have historically marked the interaction between king and followers, as well as between commoners. Downwards distribution was a language of power (Kodesh 2001), and authorities have long maintained their legitimacy by sharing wealth and symbolically relevant goods (see Médard 2006). Buganda can

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thus be largely read through the conceptual lenses of ‘wealth in people’ (Guyer 1993), according to which dependence on patrons is not condemnable, but desirable (see Ferguson 2013). In Buganda, such relations have been understood through categories of respect and even love (Hanson 2003; Scherz 2014); they contrast capitalistic accumulation and individualism, perceived instead as moral scourges of modernity and variously contested within local worlds (Englund 1995; Wiegratz 2010; Wiegratz and Cesnulyte 2016).

I further argue that by distributing ‘downwards’, individuals in Buganda immediately also enter a relation of ‘upward’ redistribution. Families and clans are the building blocks of the kingdom: by giving out to close, small circles of dependents, they support in the same breath the Baganda ethnic group as a whole, and the king who presides over it. Through redistribution, individuals contribute, and subordinate and submit themselves, to the moral approval of the kingdom, as institution and cultural-moral community. I call this multi-scalar exchanges a ‘nested redistribution’, in which failure to distribute downward results in the failure to redistribute upward and be morally approved. Two sides of the same coin, both, critically, depend on the capability to have enough to share.

This calls into the picture the second principle relevant to the paper, i.e., the opposition between culture – where the exchanges described so far find their moral legitimation – and business – the realm of competition and individualism. The restoration has encouraged a highly reflexive reconceptualization of ‘culture’ as ‘the practices and institutions that constitute moral community and reproduce it’ (Kalström 2004, 598). ‘Culture’ materialises in the kingdom and in the clans, which in turn keep those practices alive.² Today, culture in Buganda is described as a self-standing domain of moral authenticity, pitted against competing domains such as politics (its ‘categorical antithesis’; Karlström 2004, 605), and business. Elsewhere (Baral 2014) I have argued that the line between culture and politics is however blurring. Here, I explore the interweaving of ‘culture’ and ‘business’, and the interlocking of (re)distribution and accumulation.

I do so from the perspective of informal workers in Kisekka Market, Kampala, who juggled between different moral worlds. The following section introduces one of the royalist associations active in the Market, Bangawa, and illustrates its relation to ‘business’. The paper describes then the perceived differences between market accumulation and Ganda approved logics of (re)distribution. Following this, the paper argues that the rhetorical repertoire of ‘culture’, which makes redistribution mandatory but accumulation condemnable, also offers tools to overcome this contradiction. The paper concludes that the recourse to ‘culture’ implies both a burden for impoverished workers, and a chance of redemption for otherwise morally ambiguous urban hustlers.

Royalist associations in Kisekka

‘This market is based on three things’, Redi, a young broker in Kisekka Market, said, stretching three fingers: ‘the political (*eby’obufunzi*), the cultural (*eby’obwangwa*) and the economic (*eby’obusobuzi*)’. References to each of the three realms alternated in my seven-month fieldwork, between June 2014 and January 2015. ‘The economic’ was self-evident, in the marketplace. ‘The political’ emerged in the clashes between workers and municipal institutions striving to impose ‘trade order’ in Kisekka, regularly filling

newspapers. A former swamp, haven for thieves turned into a black-market hub in the 1980s, Kisekka was devoted to the trade of vehicle spare parts and mechanical repairs and represented a dirty spot on the map of Kampala, a city with modern and cosmopolitan aspirations. Sitting on an attractive tract of land for city tycoons, the market was demolished in 2014.

'The cultural' was represented in Kisekka by two Buganda royalist associations (*ebibina*). The *ebibina* support and reproduce 'culture' (in the definition given above; see Karlström 1999; Englebert 2002), by providing financial, logistic, and moral support to the kingdom, organising activities, and presiding over the respect of cultural norms. They each target specific constituencies, like university students (in the association *Nko-bazambogo*), or motorbike taxi riders (in *Kabaka Mwennyango*). Membership provides social and cultural capital, a sense of belonging and occasions to party. Coherent with traditional forms of top-down distribution, the king supports the associations generously by financing trips, organizing celebrations, consenting to royal meetings and showing up at their events.

Two associations, *Bangawa* and *Nkeretanyi*, specifically target market workers. The connection between markets and royalist mobilisation is historically not new: in colonial times, market workers mobilised in support of their king in an anti-colonial spirit (see Monteith 2019). In Kisekka, the kingdom's presence was conspicuous, as is its relevance in the life of urban workers (Goodfellow and Lindemann 2013; Monteith 2019; Philipps and Kagoro 2016). Posters of the king, the kingdom's motto '*Kabaka Awangaale*' ('Long live the king'), calendars reminding people of the king's birthday, and royal family photos embellished market corridors. On special occasions, like the coronation anniversary, workers uncovered old drums, and beat them to royal rhythms. Before the demolition of Kisekka, workers hoped that 'their father' (the king) would intervene to stop it.

The relation with the markets has been in fact revitalised in the restored Buganda. When tensions between the kingdom and the central government erupted in the 2009 'Buganda riots' (Baral and Brisset-Foucault 2009), workers felt the need of an associational platform for the urban destitute. *Bangawa* was launched in Kisekka in 2011 and mirrored the demographic of the market: mainly young men, many schools drop-outs, informally (if at all) employed. Despite their enthusiasm for 'culture', *Bangawa* became quickly infamous for the way they acted out their support, dissonant with the elaborated Ganda protocol that defines what is proper in presence of the king and his dignitaries. *Bangawa's* aggressivity, dark clothes and sunglasses 'reminding one of Rambo' evoked the imaginary of a gang. In the Buganda Parliament, where most ministers and officials are educated and well-off enough to serve the kingdom voluntarily, some of them were critical of what they called 'working-class people', or 'people of the markets'.

Bangawa's reputation was worsened by their proximity to the marketplace and, particularly, to the supposedly immoral and illicit 'business' contributing to Kisekka's notorious reputation (drug dealing and scams; see Baral 2018). Members strongly identified themselves not only as Baganda, but also as traders (*batubuza*): 'We appreciate that a foreigner is interested in our culture', I was told, 'but let's talk quickly now, because we are also *batubuza*, we are here for work'. References to the 'hustle' of Kisekka were frequent in our conversation. In the words of one of its former supporters, *Bangawa* members were even 'intoxicated' by the aspiration to accumulate (as much as they were by marijuana, he added). Kisekka, I was told, was a place 'where anything goes' –

that is, where material gain would justify any malpractice (see Wiegratz 2016, 199 for further reflections on an ‘anything-goes-in-name-of-survival’ logic and its justifications) The presumed immorality of the market infected Bangawa’s reputation.

Morality in the marketplace

‘I have gone through education, I can read ... But when I tell somebody that I work in Kisekka, they say, *‘ahhh, abo bayaaye’* [‘those are bad guys’]!, a trader said. *Bayaaye*, rascals, is how Kisekka workers were collectively addressed in town. The term spread in the 1970s to define men working in the underground economy, and it still bears negative moral connotations, although it is also appropriated and claimed with pride by men living the street life in Kampala (see Baral 2018; Pier 2021).

The market however appeared different through the insiders’ words, which described Kisekka as a moral economy, in the sense of ‘first and foremost an economy’ that is qualified by moral specificities (Fassin 2009, 1256). The basic moral principle was that ‘if something happens to me, it happens to everyone’, as one worker there put it. Credit circles funded weddings, funerals and medical expenses, promoting a community feeling in the face of individual struggles, and disciplining workers through a system unanimously recognised as legitimate (see Vokes and Mills 2015). As Monteith and Camfield (2021) showed in their research of a different market in Kampala, market economy does not succumb to sheer capitalist competition, but rather mitigates and regulates it by promoting forms of exchange that are morally justified, locally and historically

Among my interlocutors, those without capital could benefit from shared commissions in shared shops. Older workers supported the youth and the newcomers, according to a logic of intergenerational redistribution characteristic of other informal settings (see Ference 2021). Patrilineal connections were common among my informants, many of whom had started working in Kisekka upon invitation from a relative. At ‘the corner’, the junction between corridors where I have spent most of my field time, a clumsy young man who hardly fixed any deal could often eat only because he was supported by his more experienced colleagues.

‘Respect’ was instrumental to success. ‘The most common factor of success here is trustworthiness. We are all middlemen’, a trader maintained; ‘we become the bridge between [customer and seller]’. He continued: ‘If you want to get bad [with colleagues], you play with business: we respect business a lot’. Trust was particularly important for a system based on ‘goods on credit’: the spare parts were first borrowed by those who contacted the customers, who would then give part of the earnings to the seller. ‘You take [the part], you see the customer, you negotiate, you bring the money. If you want to succeed, you must make the other traders trust you’.

Kisekka economy was described as a ‘carefree’, ‘big’, ‘happy family’, using a kinship terminology common in African city settings (Bjarnesen and Utas 2018). As Fassin (2009) has pointed out, however, moral economies are not ‘homogeneous systems’ but ‘fluid realities’, seeped with internal ‘conflicts of emotions and values’ (2009, 1264). In Kisekka, the ‘family’ was fractured intersectionally along ‘vending location’, ‘ownership status’ and ‘employment status’ (as observed in another Kampala market by Young 2021, 198), but also along different aspirations and values. For the trader Henri, the market

population was divided in 'educated' (like himself) and 'uneducated'. The former were 'the foresighted', those who 'look for tomorrow', according to the temporality proper to zealous entrepreneurs. The latter were those who 'look for today', who lacked the 'acceptable manners' typical of anyone 'who has a shop, who pays a rent'. Like in the Zimbabwean case study by Jones (2010, 294), activities 'oriented to the here and now' were also in Kisekka 'opposed to morally valorised forms of planning and directing one's life'.

The traders, who worked in roofed shops, and had capital and experience, insisted on defining only *their own* work as real 'business', and pitted it against 'brokering', which required instead no capital or education. Embracing brokering as the source of their urban charisma, brokers were ambiguous figures and did not benefit from the formal entrepreneurial skills held in high esteem in formal business contexts (Thieme 2015, 237; on brokering, see also Wiegatz 2016). 'In between' figures, brokers connect actors with different degrees of knowledge about a deal, engage in 'contest[s] of wits' (Jenkins 1994, 436) and bring both 'expertise and uncertainty' to the transaction (Lindquist 2015, 172). In Kisekka, traders accused them of 'stubborn actions' (*efuggyo*). Mr Bakasibira, a jolly trader in his sixties, declared that riots were made by 'the jobless or the brokers... They have no wife, no child, no shop, so nothing to lose'.

Traders had their moral ambiguities, in turn: a degree of cheating, a trader maintained, was part of their game, even in formal and legal transactions: 'only that in that case, we call it a *commission*'. The literature has amply explored the morality of informal economies and their social embeddedness in Africa, proving their evaluative, coherent logics despite them being scapegoated for failed development (Kinyanjui 2014; Burton 2007), also in Kisekka (see Philipps and Kagoro 2016; Baral 2018). Far from idealising idyllic relations of exchange and reciprocity (often fragile and unstable, see Dawson 2021), this literature illuminates the cogent moral scaffolding of informality. To mention just a few examples, Pietilä (2007, 39) accounts for the existence of a 'good kind of cunning' (*ujanja*) in a Tanzanian market, one that is considered "'healthy" cleverness' (40); Ference (2021) shows how even violence is informed by obligations of redistribution among Nairobi *matatu* drivers; Newell (2006) shows how theft is morally regulated by social obligations and belonging in Abidjan; Champy (*this issue*), Champy explains the moral foundations of petty trade and theft in Ouagadougou. Moral order(s) have equally been shown to underpin interstitial practices like fraud and corruption (Wiegatz 2016) or gambling (Binde 2005; Van Wyk 2012).

'Business' in the market had therefore moral underpinnings, influenced by class, profession and kinship solidarities, which cut across ethnic identities in a place marked by ethnic pluralism (like other markets in Kampala; see Monteith 2019). Here I am however interested in how specifically Ganda norms shaped the perceptions of Kisekka as a morally deficient place. In another market of Kampala, Monteith has brilliantly shown how workers' moral codes are rooted in local Ganda tropes: 'The organization of obligation... draws heavily on logics and idioms of Buganda cultural practices' (Monteith 2018, 27), which include 'showing heart' (*omutima*), i.e., an ethics of reciprocity (see Scherz 2014), the willingness to take on dependents, and the fulfilment of moral obligations such as giving shelter or food to the needy. My material, which is based on conversations with a very specific sample (i.e., radical Ganda royalists), takes a partially different direction, one that reinforces the rhetoric

of the market's 'business' and the kingdom's 'culture' as irremediably antagonistic. Passionately involved in the cultural revival, engaged in the kingdom's associational life and architects of its reproduction, my informants insisted on an irreconcilable difference, as I show in the next section.

Pitting culture and morality against business

For Fassin (2009), a 'moral economy' can also be interpreted as an economy of moralities, or 'the production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments ... in social space' (2009, 1257). In this section, I explore the way in which accumulation and (re)distribution respectively inspired the circulation of opposite moral sentiments, delineating supposedly impermeable boundaries between them.

As my interlocutors explained, the cultural realm needs to be kept safe not only from politics, but also from the pollution of 'business', which translates into narratives on proper and improper ways of earning and spending. It is one matter to have earning and spending inspired by Ganda values while doing business to make them proper: this is what happens with 'having heart', discussed above, or when Ganda spirits (*emisambwa*) refuse to help a trader to steal, as I was told, because theft is contrary to cultural norms. These are cases in which Ganda culture directs marketplace practices, making business morally sustainable. It is however a completely different matter to preserve the category of 'culture' tout court, as a complex assemblage of values, institutions, people and relations, from the pollution of the market economy. This endeavour requires one further leap, subscribing to a more drastic formulation of a Ganda moral economy as an alternative, rather than a corrective, to the marketplace: 'morals', in this narrative, are 'always already resistant', and markets are 'only marginally or epiphenomenally accompanied by morals', to borrow Muelebach's words (2012, 6). The 'moral sentiments' circulating in the marketplace cannot be but discomfiting. In a country where economy is precarious and unpredictable, and corruption rife, to engage in market 'business' is suspicious by definition (see Jones 2010), regardless of what kind of business one is involved in.

The estrangement of the marketplace from the royal (and thus cultural) domain may be traced back to the 1880s, when the establishment of the first trading sites in the heart of Buganda 'coincided practically with the decline of royal power' (Médard 2006, 163). 'The king no longer controlled prices': offer and demand replaced royal discretion, and 'social exchanges' (150) based on gift and redistribution were partially replaced by commerce (163), in a context in which wealth had long been represented by war spoils and symbolic goods (Trouwborst 2017[1991]; Médard 2006). The antagonism between marketplace and the palace is an instance of the broader resistance posed to trade all over the world by traditional authorities, who feared that its translocal nature would remove it from their control (see Hann and Hart 2009). However, we know that Ganda commoners also found the new practices of exchange unsatisfying: they accused the king of 'becoming selfish', since goods 'were previously given as gifts to meet expressed needs and cement alliances' (Médard 2006 in Monteith 2019, 251).

In 2014–2015, in the capital of the restored kingdom, 'business' and 'culture' were again formulated as two alternative moral worlds. The words of one of my interlocutors, a broker in Kisekka, summarised their distance. When asked about the difference between 'culture' and 'business', Dada explained it in terms of respectability. '[In Kisekka,] no matter

culture: if you are born Ugandan, and you are a man, “You play like a rebel”.³ When it comes to money, we don’t mind about [culture] ... if you say “I want to wash my feet”, and you say “I have money”, I’ll do that’.

Dada was not doing well, in his one-room hut covered by iron sheets in the ‘ghetto’ of Bwaise. His elliptic words acknowledge that poverty forces one to renounce to one’s values, and exposes one to losing respect, *ekitiibwa* in Luganda; faced by poverty, individuals follow their own interests, undermining ethnic solidarity and pride. Socially and culturally vital to Buganda since precolonial times, *ekitiibwa* is embedded in the adherence to hierarchies, and the capability to get followers (Iliffe 2005). Subordination is not negative in itself, yet it is fair only when the superior proves to deserve it (and not, as in Dada’s case, because they can buy it). If ‘generosity, capability, justice, and above all, success’ (168–169) secure respect, Dada admitted deserting this moral world in the name of business. In the same breath, however, he reassured me that outside the marketplace, other moral norms worked on him: ‘... But, my mum knows that I am well brought up [in culture]; when I greet her, I go down on my knees’, he said, referring to the Ganda custom of kneeling for respect, unanimously considered one of the most explicit embodied markers of ‘culture’.

Recounting his experience in Kisekka, a Facebook user described the ‘goons’ (brokers) and how they tried to con him with their ‘well known scam’ and explained their malpractice as part of the ‘moral decadence in the country’, confirming the idea that the market is devoid of values. Inevitably, the association with Kisekka, the easy recourse to renounce ‘culture’ for selfish interests, and the tendency of malpractices among the category of the brokers to which so many Bangawa belonged, represented a dangerous polluting factor for the workers, and particularly for the royalist association. Bangawa’s claim to protect culture was continuously delegitimised in a place dominated by ‘selfish interests’. Max, one the founders of Bangawa who later turned against it, empathised with the police’s suspicions about the group. For him, Bangawa had put roots in ‘some parts of Kampala ... not clearly identified’, as he told me cryptically. He made confused gestures with his hands, to indicate an intersection of things that clash with each other: he was suggesting a chaotic situation, where ‘people cheated and had disorganized plans’. ‘Disorganised’ is a loaded word in the English of central Uganda, often hinting at the unreliability of people and things. Although he himself worked in Kisekka, Max subscribed to the general narrative about a market where things were not transparent.

Similarly, a former member of Bangawa told me how the association at some point was ‘losing track’. When things go the proper way, people in Buganda would often tell me that they ‘are in line’, describing a situation that unfolds according to cultural norms (for example, proper rituals for the ancestors). The expression would usually be accompanied by a gesture of the hand indicating a straight line ahead of the speaker. Max told me how Bangawa was ‘going astray’ and committing ‘bad actions’, and accompanied his words with a zig-zagging gesture. After all, as noted by the informants of James (2010) in a similar context in Zimbabwe, hustling ‘is all about zig-zag’, it cannot be done ‘straight’. Some Bangawa members had to be physically disciplined, one told me, to ‘make sure that they go back to the way they are supposed to be’. Bangawa were ‘doing their own stuff’, as insinuated in the royal newspaper *Eddoboosi* (17-20/08/2012), putting their interests before culture. By doing so, they were failing the mission that every subject of the kingdom should fulfil by

redistributing to the community in ways that are considered morally appropriated. Max deliberated that there could be no coexistence of 'culture' and 'business' in Kisekka: that is why in 2013, he left Bangawa and became the founder of a new royalist association: Nkeretanyi.

Keeping culture clean, away from the market

Together with the line, another metaphor – dirt – locates people and actions on a moral map. Remembering the launch of Nkeretanyi, Max used both: 'I am clean, I shall not be blamed', he remembered saying at the ceremony, relieved for the separation; '[people] even clapped', he added, 'and said that 'finally [the association] is in the good line''. In my interviews, it was clear that the royal establishment had a preference for Nkeretanyi. In the market, the new group did not enjoy the same sympathy: I was explicitly asked by Nkeretanyi members not to mention their names in my meetings with Bangawa, for fears of consequences.

Keeping culture clean and bringing it back in line required physical distance from the marketplace. Nkeretanyi's headquarters were moved from Kisekka to the Wamala Tombs, where the shrine for the jawbone of king Ssuna II (1832–1856) is located. For the member Diriisa, this is where 'the culture of this generation⁴ started': Nkeretanyi was donated a piece of land by the kingdom; a council of elders was appointed to lead its activities. 'Wamala is a place of culture, while Kisekka is a place of business', Diriisa spelled out with vigour: 'We needed to take culture away from the market'. The geographical shift represented an important symbolical step, 'because we [Nkeretanyi] are in culture, while [Bangawa] teach business'. He continued: 'Bangawa started from Kisekka, but we moved to another place to keep our project clean'.

Nkeretanyi performed their identity not only by moving away, but also convincingly performing their submission to the kingdom, by redistributing money, services and goods to the Baganda. They engaged wholeheartedly in voluntary work for the kingdom, particularly on the royal tombs, symbols of 'culture' par excellence. Their first task was to provide the central pole to restore the Kasubi royal tombs, burnt in an act of arson in 2010. Such activities epitomised the role of Nkeretanyi, that the trader Baka-sibira summarised as follows: 'to develop our culture, to be organized, to do community work' (note the use of 'organised' in antithesis to the 'disorganised' Bangawa).

Community work was described by my interlocutors as voluntary and rooted in the traditional practice of *bulungibwansi* ('the good of the country'), collective maintenance work on villages and roads. I was told that voluntarism expresses 'the spirit of the tribe' (*mwoyo gwa ggwanga*): being generous to the community is part of being a good person in Buganda. The compulsory dimension of *bulungibwansi* in the kingdoms of the Great Lakes cannot however be neglected: in neighbouring Rwanda the activity is today prescribed by law (the *umuganda*, see Sundberg 2016); in Buganda, while not mandatory, it is perceived as a necessary part of performing 'Gandanness' and loyalty to the ethnic group. By working on the tombs and preparing venues, removing weeds and garbage from the cultural heritage sites, Nkeretanyi quite literally keep culture clean and confirm their good Gandanness.

The 'spirit of the tribe' is expressed also through material generosity. Nkeretanyi's activities were self-funded, and some were costly. For the launch, founders paid for

new attire for the members, to comply with the expectations of 'civility' entrenched in Ganda culture. As Brisset-Foucault (2019) illustrates, politeness, respect and decency are properties of the good citizen in the royalist circles; according to my interlocutors, they are expressed also through clothing. The cost of the uniforms was three million shillings (around 1000 USD): 'our money', Max described, 'without minding whether we would get it back or not. What we wanted was ... this package. Imagine more than a hundred people, putting on nice attires'. The 'Rambo' attire of Bangawa were replaced by brown, 'decent' gowns with printed royal symbols; in those gowns, members 'talked gently', differently from 'others acting as hooligans'.

By investing money and time in the kingdom's wellbeing, subjects enter a classic redistribution cycle with the king at the centre. Money is injected into Buganda accounts through many channels. The 2020 Buganda budget foresaw an income of 515,558,500 shillings (around 150,000 USD) from the sale of certificates and royal portraits.⁵ Certificates can be bought as token to the kingdom but are mandatory for Baganda to have their customary marriages validated. Another chunk of the budget comes from contributions to the restoration of the Kasubi Tombs – 300,000,000 shillings expected in 2020. The kingdom redistributes this wealth by investing in a plethora of activities, which appeared in the 2020 budget under labels such as: Education promotion; Sports, youth and leisure; Health care promotion; Culture, Traditions, Research, and Security (Buganda Kingdom 2020). These rubrics include a plethora of interventions, from information campaigns to purchase of material, from sponsoring pedagogical events to cleaning and refurbishing heritage sites and palaces in the kingdom. Associations like Nkeretanyi are involved in anything from tourism projects to the organization of royal celebrations, where they also often present gifts (*amakula*) to the king.

Even if partly rhetorical, the emphasis on voluntarism and redistribution represents an important counterpoint to the selfish accumulation in the marketplace. Compared to the reality of my interlocutor's lives, the contrast may sound hypocritical: the workers (including the royalists) spent most of their time in 'dirty' Kisekka and what they described as two separate realms seemed to intersect continuously with each other in their everyday lives. This begs the question of how they managed the tension between moral worlds, something I address in the next section.

Redistribution as a practice for moral redemption

The narrative of a generous king distributing downwards is only one part of the story. Trouwborst (2017[1991]) underlines how precolonial kings redistributed selectively: only few loyal chiefs benefitted directly from him, while subjects rather depended on the generosity of local chiefs. Buganda was less centralised than the royalist rhetoric (and Ganda historiography) would have it: Hanson (2009) has talked of 'heterarchy', or centripetal forces within the kingdom, as a limitation to the narrative of a strong, generous king.

Moreover, in the past like today subjects are not only involved in a one-way vertical relation with the king - the great distributor: they are also enmeshed in a plethora of relationships of redistribution on a variety of scales. Heterarchy is the premise of the nested redistribution in which everyone is involved. Every individual belongs to a family, which in turn is inserted in increasingly broader segments (the *lunyiriri*, segment

of the *mutuba*, in turn a segment of the *ssiga*) which constitute a patrilineal clan (*kika*) with a clan head, in a structure that culminates with the king. They are also members of association, working groups, credit circles etc. If sharing with followers has historically represented a moral injunction to Ganda elites (Scherz 2014), redistributing money, good and services at all these levels is also key to be accepted ‘upwards’, by the elders, the ethnic group, and the king himself. While constituting themselves as patrons, individuals submit themselves as clients to a higher authority that will ideally assess their moral merits and deservingness to be Baganda.

The importance of redistribution for moral redemption was explicitly contemplated by Max, when he reflected on the concept of *obuntubulamu*. This complex concept, which I provisionally translate as ‘morality’, embraces traits of civility, kindness and uprightness that constitute a ‘good muganda’: for Max, it consists in ‘a multiplicity of factors, which come together to make the goodness within someone’. Importantly, it consists in very practical, physical and embodied traits: ‘The way someone talks, is calm, is disciplined’ makes *obuntubulamu*, which is ‘politeness, but not only inward politeness: also the way you move, the way you dress, your discipline ... the way you eat ... the way you stay with others’. As such, it is ‘the strongest pillar that defines the Buganda tribe, which is known to be so much disciplined, welcoming and not selfish at all’.

In Max’s words, morality crucially consists in relationality. ‘The goodness within someone’ is performative – the good subject emerges as an always precarious product of praxis, rather than pre-existing to it. This is how Mahmood (2005) conceives *habitus* – less an unconscious disposition (in Bourdieu’s fashion), than a reflexive, intentional and repeated (‘cumulative’: 216) engagement in good acts as cultivation of the moral self. By repeatedly acting well ‘with others’, as Max suggests, ‘moral virtues are acquired through a coordination of outward behavior ... with inward dispositions’ (Mahmood 2005, 215).

This has important implications for the *bayaaye*. ‘Dirty’ and ‘disorganised’ as they might be, they could still aspire to a place in the Buganda moral community by consciously and intentionally acting for the good for the clan and the kingdom. Another observation by Max corroborated this view: ‘Having no morality [*obuntubulamu*] doesn’t necessarily mean that you don’t love Buganda’, he said, in a sentence that significantly conflated individual dispositions and collective wellbeing.

‘One may have all the bad things, violence, selfishness; but when he goes to his clan, maybe ... he contributes very much, paying education to youth, doing [collective work], contributing to the reconstruction of the [royal tombs]. In sum, he contributes to [the kingdom]’.

By redistributing, ‘bad guys’ may shapeshift into good ones. In this performative view of morality, to engage in an individualistic and competitive marketplace economy does not preclude moral restoration. ‘The people I told you about, the *bayaaye*’, Max explained ‘did things that we may say did *not* signal morality; but they *may* become good, for the interest of the kingdom’.

While friends and relatives of Kisekka workers highlighted the fear that their ‘children’ would be spoiled by the market life, participant observation of workers returning to their villages drew a different picture. The night before a wedding in Luwero, east of Kampala, I giggled at the jokes made about ‘Alex the *muyaaye* [singular for *bayaaye*]’, the Kisekka mechanic, nephew to the bride, who had invited me to the party. The following day,

dressed in his traditional attire, Alex took part in the distribution of gifts – food, banana fibre baskets, and a set of fluorescent pink suitcases – to the bride’s family. No reference to Kisekka was made, and he was acknowledged through kinship terminology and full first name, clan name and surname. The experience resonated with other voices in Kisekka: ‘When we go home [to the village]’, one mechanic told me, ‘they are happy, because they know that you come with some little, little money’. Another echoed: ‘Now my mum knows that I am getting money here, and at least she accepts [Kisekka]’. The performativity of ‘culture’ carves out a time of reconciliation, through the power of redistribution.

However, many Kisekka workers were far from being successful patrons. For some of my interlocutors, redistribution was a challenge to survival. The pain of sharing was particularly compelling when they visited their families to perform filial care. Conrad, a young worker at ‘the corner’, cried out of frustration the day we visited his mother thirty kilometres from Kampala. The money spent on buying bread and butter for her impacted his transport budget, traffic jams delayed him, and the rain stained the good trousers worn for the occasion. When he ended the umpteenth phone call from his mother, angrily investigating his whereabouts, Conrad hid his face to cry: she had just called him *muyaaye*, a sensitive humiliation from a mother, especially for men working in Kisekka. On our way back from the stressful day, Conrad shared how he aspired to be a recognised member of his clan and to succeed his elder as official heir: however, he had never been considered for the position – ‘they think I am just a *muyaaye*’, he acknowledged.

As Graeber (2011) has explored in great details, the moral forcefulness of debt lies in how it allows the framing of a relation as flawed on the victim’s side: guilt creeps in, as a double-burden to the indebted. For men like Conrad, redistribution was a performance enacted from a less-than-ideal position, which instilled guilt in men who desperately aspired to some degree of acceptance: they had to struggle to look clean, in line and organised, before they could be even allowed to aspire to having followers.

Finding a way: explaining business as a means to cultural ends

As signalled by Conrad’s failure to become heir, the chances of moral restoration through distribution are low when money is scarce. As Nystrand, studying informal economy in central Uganda, succinctly puts it, ‘eating a lot of money might be made legitimate if it is shared’ (2015, 157); inequality is not wrong per se, if those who have more are able to redistribute (Scherz 2014). However, the workers I met did not have ‘a lot of money’, and were instead stuck in a cycle of aspirations and guilt, which may never result in the desired respect and status.

Appadurai has famously observed how the ‘capacity to aspire’, culturally shaped and ‘formed in interaction and in the thick of social life’ (Appadurai 2004, 67), is performed differently by the rich and the poor. The former has access to experiences, resources and knowledge that gives a ‘more fully developed capacity to aspire’ (68), while the latter ‘are frequently ... encouraged to subscribe to norms whose social effects is to further ... exacerbate their inequality’ (66). In this sense, we might be tempted to denounce the culturalist discourse as a rhetorical embellishment of structural relations of power that constrain the *bayaaye* of Kisekka much more than then well-off, depriving them of the possibilities to aspire to inhabit the position they wish for. Is ‘culture’ just a play of false consciousness, ideologically justifying exploitation?

My interlocutors did not abstain from critically assessing this possibility. 'It's all about your ability to solve the financial problems. The moment you score there, how your income was earned matters less', my friend Joel told me. 'During a burial', he exemplified bitterly, 'the ceremony can be paused to wait for the rich clan member who hasn't arrived. But they can never wait for the poor one'. In Joel's reading, the pressure to distribute as a 'good muganda' does not differ much from the experience of breadwinners around the world. The informalisation of the urban economy and the skyrocketing prices of marriage rituals and bridewealth that are sweeping many African contexts, including Uganda, put increasing pressure on the breadwinner. 'True Ganda culture, just like any other culture must be kept away from the bad business', Joel conceded, 'but currently, the money from bad business and the culture are highly fused ... This means that people with good morals may not be accorded the same respect [as others with bad morals]'. To minimise the burden of redistribution, day in day out, many found themselves compelled to apply what Wiegatz and Cesnulyte (2016, 19) define as 'immediate individualism', and the 'de-linking from complicated moral economies of kin'. While this is salvific in the short term, it could hardly be sustained without losing face. My research assistant, also an urban worker, was haunted by the spirit of his deceased uncle at night: he maintained it was because he had shunned his family and their money request for too long. 'They think the city is spoiling me', he said. 'I am not a *muyaaye*, but this is what I am for them'.

Despite his harsher tone, I argue that Joel's rendition confirms, rather than contradicts, the culturalist explanation given by Max: those who can act well with others, and for the clan, deserve to be rehabilitated, no matter where the source of provision lies. Rather than describing it as false consciousness, or as 'social norms' that 'exacerbate inequality' (in Appadurai's words), I argue that the appeal to 'culture' allowed it to give meaning to the aspiration to accumulate in the marketplace. In Kisekka, desire to accumulate wealth could be sharpened by the wish for the cultural and moral recognition coming with its redistribution, even if the path to full Gandanness remained uncertain and tentative. Workers had to hustle like *bayaaye*, earn, redistribute – and then had to hustle again, brokering and trading in one of the most criticised places in Kampala, to accumulate, exposing themselves once more to the risk of moral abjection. 'Business', so far from that 'spirit of the tribe', and for which Kisekka workers were morally condemned in the culturalist discourse, could be reassessed in the broader picture of good relations within the clan, and in the long-term temporality of the kingdom wellbeing. Making money (*any* kind of money) was therefore as dangerous as fundamental.

I take this as an emic specification of a widely recognisable pattern: the tension between desire to accumulate individually and pressures to distribute collectively. This pattern can be traced back to what Perry and Bloch (1989), in their introduction to a comparative collection on 'the morality of exchange', synthetically describe as two 'transactional orders'. On one hand, 'a "sphere" of short-term transactions' characterises individual accumulation, which in the present case was associated with the ruthlessness of Kisekka. On the other hand, 'transactions concerned with the reproduction of the long-term social or cosmic order' (24), can be identified in those practices that got Conrad and his colleagues entangled in frustrating relations with their clans. These orders, for Perry and Bloch, are 'related but separate' (24): in the case of the Buganda subjects working in Kisekka, I argue that the (hardly moral) short-term transactions were reconceptualised as an inevitable part of (morally encouraged) circles of redistribution.

The sublimation undergone by the *bayaaye*'s money in these circles plays an important role in the moral economy of the clans. Karlström has observed how after the restoration of the Buganda kingdom, 'development' has increasingly been conceptualised as '*kuku-laakulanya*', 'to make [something] grow and grow'. The term indicates a progressive communal growth (Karlström 2004, 604), in which 'individual motives presupposed by liberal models' are subordinated to 'collective ones'. While potentially disruptive of the Ganda moral landscape, practices of accumulation can be reintegrated into the life of the community as a means to ultimately 'develop Buganda' (2004, 607) and maintain at the same time the moral recognition one aspires to. Karlström's observations resonate with the royalist workers' predicament: the very culturalist narrative that held certain practices of 'short-term transaction' as morally dangerous also made them necessary, and hence morally valuable in the long run.

The seemingly divergent economic practices in which the workers engaged every day, therefore, could in reality be subsumed under the same moral landscape. We see here the 'dual ontology' that Muelebach (2012, 8) describes as feature of the neoliberal subject, destined to keep together 'self-interest and fellow-feelings' as the only way to cope with the inequalities of capitalism. Discussing voluntarism in neoliberal Italy, Muelebach shows how 'compassionate and empathetic' citizens were mobilised in service of – and as reparation to – a withdrawing state. Paradoxically, those who embraced voluntarism more enthusiastically were precisely those who were most critical towards the neoliberal turn that made voluntarism fundamental in the first place. The polemic, anticapitalistic scope of their engagement ended up subsumed by the fact that they were, indeed, doing good to the neoliberal state. The Buganda case bears similarities: the desire to do good to the kingdom encourages participation and redistribution, even when these reinforce internal inequalities. In both cases, however, the apparent incompatibility of morality and capitalism, of 'self-interest and fellow-feelings' (8), is transcended by a moral economy that explains – and needs – both.

Conclusions

As argued by Comaroff and Comaroff (2001), sharp distinctions between individualistic and communitarian forms of personhood in Africa have proved to be an exaggeration, a 'populist postcolonial obsession' (278). Similarly, the craze for 'culture' in postcolonial Buganda has certainly contributed to a narrative of exceptionalism that does not necessarily correspond to reality, where lines between culture and business, or culture and politics, are rather blurred.

Beyond these rhetorical 'obsessions', however, lies the malleability of cultural tools that are put to work to reconcile circuits of accumulation and redistribution in pragmatic ways. Toren (1989), studying notions of moral economy in Central Fiji, recounts the 'struggle' of his interlocutors 'to contain the notion of balanced reciprocity within that of tribute to chiefs' (160). Kisekka workers, in the same way, acknowledged the contradictions between intersecting moral economies, and struggled to make sense of them in ways that were both coherent with historically validated moral landscapes, and adaptable to contemporary needs. This tension worked as a reminder of origins, responsibility and belonging, while not encumbering (rather, encouraging) forms of accumulation that the urban condition inevitably requires. 'Culture', despite its essentialist attachment to

an ideal past, helps making sense of a merciless urban informal economy and to cultivate resilience to precarity. Following Salverda (2021, 2), I have explored 'what actors consider morally (un)acceptable practices', understanding their behaviours well beyond crude economic interests, and investigating what keeps even deceptive practices alive in the name of moral, psychological and affective gains.

In the final analysis, the moral milieus of market and kingdom are interlocked, even though a culturalist rhetoric separates them sharply. The binary language of moral pollution versus cleansing, of disorganisation versus straight lines, of personal versus collective interest, captured by the 'three parts' listed in Redi's opening statement, is overcome through the practice of nested redistribution. The promises of culture did not dramatically change the predicament of Kisekka workers: justifying their practices through one or another moral system, they had to hustle anyway – earn, distribute, and hustle again. However, the pragmatics of Ganda morality, so rooted in the performance of good (redistributive) actions, offered hustle some meaning, and kept dreams of respect and recognition alive.

Notes

1. Buganda is a region and cultural institution. Baganda (sing. muganda) are the people from Buganda; Luganda is their language; Ganda is the adjective.
2. In 2012, I was asked whether in my home country we 'have clans', and to my negative reply, I was told, 'Oh, you don't have culture?!'
3. A quote from his own song.
4. Meaning, the descendants of mythical Buganda founder, Kintu.
5. I thank Tom Kyembe for providing access to this information, despite the distance imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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