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Gender, Political Participation and the Transformation of Associational Life in Uganda and Tanzania

*Aili Mari Tripp*¹

Uganda and Tanzania are two of many African countries with diverse post-colonial experiences that have taken steps towards political liberalization in the 1990s. In both countries, the continued pursuit of political liberalization is threatened by sectarianism. Any consideration of Uganda's political future immediately raises questions of how to resolve the seemingly intractable religious, regional and ethnic differences that have had devastating consequences in its recent history. Concerns voiced by non-Baganda over the recent upsurge in monarchism in Buganda and the resented perceived political advantage of individuals from western Uganda in positions of power are but two examples of the ever present issue of ethnicity in Uganda.² Tanzania, which has had a less volatile recent past, was by the early 1990s seeing manifestations of religious sectarianism and undercurrents of ethnic tensions, including tensions between Muslim and Christian communities³ and between the African and Asian business communities,⁴ that were being expressed more openly than at any other time in its post-colonial history.

Rather than explore the new manifestations of sectarianism in Tanzania and Uganda, which remains an important task, this essay asks what are the countervailing forces within society that challenge these new or revived sectarian tendencies? Are there concurrent developments that provide bases for institutional change that might serve as alternatives to a political, economic and social order based on sectarianism? While there are no simple answers to these questions, research on the informal economy in Tanzania and its related organizations (1987-88) and currently on women's associations in Uganda (1992 to the present) suggests one arena where one finds such cross-cutting tendencies: in the emergence of new women's urban associations in the late 1980s. There are two main reasons why women's groups, in particular, serve this purpose. One has to do with the fact that women of diverse backgrounds have found themselves sharing common interests in fighting for greater inclusiveness in the current process of political liberalization, having historically been left out of formal politics. The

second reason has to do with the deepening economic crisis that has placed greater pressures on women to become key providers within the household, necessitating new organizational strategies. Economic survival and the belief that one's own survival is contingent on the survival of others are the bases of women's associations, rather than an ascriptive affiliation. To cope with unprecedented hardship, women have joined to form groups to facilitate income-generating activities, savings and the provision of social services such as daycare.

What is especially striking, as this essay will show, is how consistently these groups are *not* based on ethnicity or religion in the urban context, even when possibilities exist for organization based along such lines. Women do participate in ethnically based cultural and burial groups and ethnically based urban associations that are concerned with the development of a rural hometown or home region, but the membership of these groups tends to be both men and women, not exclusively women. Because the new non-sectarian based groups cannot fall back on traditional kinship obligations or other patterns of establishing trust that work within ascriptively based groups, many groups are struggling to establish new mechanisms to ensure accountability. The push for greater inclusiveness and accountability continues to be a painful learning experience for many groups, but there are some small and important changes taking place. This is not to minimize the difficulties that persist, but rather to acknowledge what changes have occurred and recognize that they may form a potential basis for institutional reform that would stress greater accountability, pluralizing society and instituting more democratic procedures.

A second purpose of this essay is to reexamine the utility of the concept of "civil society" in non-Western contexts—a concept that has gained currency among donors, scholars and participants in social movements. Uganda and Tanzania are undergoing major transformations in associational life and some of the most dramatic changes have occurred in women's organizations. The remarkable new visibility of women in formal and informal unregistered groups provides an opportunity to explore the meanings of changing associational life in relation to political liberalization.

This article draws primarily on interviews with leaders of key women's associations and female political leaders and case studies of eight women's organizations involved primarily in local gender-based conflicts (e.g., to establish a health center, to reclaim market space). The article is also based on interviews with women involved in over 150 formal and informal women's associations in Kampala and Jinja. The research was ongoing at the time of writing and was carried out from May to July 1992 and January through July 1993.⁵ The article focuses primarily on Uganda because the research in that country dealt specifically with the political impact of women's organizations.

References to Tanzania, which are not as extensive as the references to Uganda, are nevertheless important from a comparative point of view because of the many noticeable similarities. They are based on fieldwork conducted in Tanzania between 1987 and 1988 that focused on the informal economy but also looked at its organizational dimensions. In addition to conducting several hundred interviews with small scale entrepreneurs (a snowball survey of 51 mostly middle income women entrepreneurs), I also carried out a cluster survey of 287 residents (145 men and 142 women) in two parts of Dar es Salaam (Buguruni and Manzese).⁶ In particular, the survey vividly demonstrated the link between the informal economy and women's informal savings associations. The study also included interviews with national leaders of women's associations like the Women's Union (UWT) and its small projects branch (SUWATA), the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and other such formal groups.

Uganda and Tanzania Cases Contrasted

In many ways this is a heuristic essay because it is an attempt to recast some of the questions being asked by others working on problems of institutional weakness in Africa (see, for example, Brett 1991, Hyden 1983, Wunsch and Olowu 1991) and explore the existing resources within society that might shed light on new bases of organization and possibilities for institutional reform. Both countries are in a process of rapid social transformation, the outcome of which is not self-evident.

An examination of women's formal and informal organizations in urban Uganda and Tanzania can usefully serve as a basis for a study of institutional reform because in both countries women's organizations are among the fastest growing types of new associations. In Tanzania, for example, the emergence of informal savings societies, which are primarily women's groups, coincides with women's new involvement in income-generating activities. Most women interviewed had joined a savings group shortly after they began their income-generating projects, which was after 1985 for 80 percent of the women interviewed in 1988. Similarly, formal women's organizations have proliferated. For example, the Tanzania Women Lawyers Association was formed in 1988, the Tanzania Media Women's Association in 1987, the Association of Businesswomen in Tanzania in 1990 and a Dar es Salaam handicraft co-operative of retired women, *Getting Old is to Grow*, was established in 1991. By 1993, the number of formal groups had increased to the point that women were forming networks such as the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme to coordinate activities and share information.

In Uganda the recent proliferation of women's groups, both at the local and national level, occurred after 1986 when the current regime

led by Yoweri Museveni came into power. Notable exceptions include the Young Women's Christian Association formed in 1952, the Mothers Union formed in 1908, the Uganda Catholic Women's Guild started in 1963 and the Uganda Muslim Women's Association established in 1949. But a significantly large number of prominent groups came into existence after 1986, including the Uganda Women Entrepreneurs Association formed in 1987, the Uganda Women's Effort to Save Orphans in 1986, Action for Development (ACFODE) in 1985, Akiika Embuga Women's Self Help Association in 1989 and the Uganda Global Network on Reproductive Rights in 1988. The growth of women's organizations parallels that of nongovernmental organizations in general, which had increased to the point that a Development Network of Indigenous Voluntary Associations (DENIVA) was formed in 1988 (Musheshe 1990, 4). Even though this paper focuses on urban associations, similar patterns were evident in rural areas. For instance, one woman who had grown up in Kamuli district said that in the past in her home village there had been only emergency-based self-help groups and religious and welfare associations. Since 1989 women had become involved in savings, income-generating, market, farming and animal husbandry groups, which formed, as she explained, because "the economic situation forced women to think about their needs, to raise money and to take matters into their own hands."⁷

Unlike Tanzania, which has enjoyed relative stability, Uganda plunged into years of civil war, internal conflict and institutionalized violence beginning with Idi Amin's takeover in 1971 and lasting roughly until 1986 when the National Resistance Movement (NRM) led by Museveni came to power after waging a prolonged guerrilla war, bringing relative stability to the country. Fifteen years of conflict left over 800,000 people dead, 200,000 exiled and millions displaced within the country (Watson 1988, 14). Tanzania, in spite of its many ethnic nationalities, troublesome union with Zanzibar and strong religious affinities, has not been plagued by the kinds of conflicts Uganda has faced due to sharp ethnic and religious divisions.⁸ Tanzania has had a single ruling party since independence but in 1992 took steps towards establishing a multiparty system. Uganda has had a no-party system since 1986 and has been led by the broad-based NRM. Opposition parties operate openly and unofficially and are constituted primarily along religious and ethnic lines, with the Uganda Peoples Congress (of the former President Obote) made up mainly of non-Baganda Protestants and the Democratic Party comprised mainly of Catholics.⁹ In April 1993 a group of Muslims formed a Uganda Islamic Revolutionary Party.¹⁰ In spite of widely different experiences with governmental leadership, Tanzania and Uganda share the experience of state decline and economic crisis that became especially severe in the

late 1970s. Out of these crises, new spaces for associational life emerged in both countries, bearing a strong resemblance to one another.

The examples of Tanzania and Uganda are illustrative because both countries have taken unprecedented steps towards political liberalization as a result of pressures from above and below. Yet, in many ways, they embody characteristics that are generally considered antithetical to liberalization and democratization, including a small middle class, weakness of the official private sector, the lack of a democratic tradition and severe economic crisis in the past decade. Similar trends in associational life are emerging in both countries even though they have faced considerably different conditions.

Economic Pressures and Changing Associational Life

An important factor contributing to the increase in women's associations in both countries has been the economic crisis that began in the late 1970s, which put particular pressures on women to expand their income-generating activities and consequently to seek collective means of coping with new economic pressures. In Tanzania real wages fell by 83 percent from 1974 to 1988 (Bureau of Statistics 1989). Uganda's real minimum wages fell by a staggering 26.4 percent annually between 1980 and 1983 alone (Mamdani 1990, 438). Women's economic strategies became especially prominent in the 1980s because of women's key role in sustaining the household. The increased burden has been felt especially in urban areas which were hit hard by dramatic declines in real wage incomes, by civil service and factory layoffs, cutbacks in social and welfare services and the imposition of austerity measures as part of economic reform programs. Urban women in both countries have been primarily responsible for providing food and clothing for the household and for paying school and health fees. Women have subsequently expanded their involvement in urban farming and small businesses through self-employment or joint ventures. This has necessitated an array of various collective coping strategies, giving rise to new women's associations and networks.

Women's role in informal and private enterprises has been in large measure determined by the fact that women have been less tied to the formal economy than men and have not had access to jobs in the formal wage sector due to lack of education and discriminatory hiring practices. This has meant that as formal incomes have declined, there have been increasing pressures on women to seek informal and alternate sources to sustain the household. In both countries this shift from reliance on formal incomes to reliance on informal and private incomes occurred in the 1980s.

In many rural areas, women have also pursued these kinds of economic activities because of increasing land pressures and customary land inheritance and ownership patterns which discriminate against women holding land of their own. In Uganda only 7 percent of the land is owned by women in a country where the majority of the population obtains their sustenance from agriculture and where women grow 90 percent of all food crops and 60 percent of all cash crops (Tamale 1992; Watson 1988).¹¹ Single, divorced and widowed women and women who want independent sources of livelihood have often entered into trade or small-scale production or crafts without options to own and reap benefits of smallholder land tenure.

While most urban women have been involved in small businesses, ranging from hairdressing to making and selling pastries and other foodstuffs, running vegetable and fruit stalls, and making and selling beer, there is also a growing class of large-scale entrepreneurial women. Some (in Uganda popularly known as the "Dubai traders") are engaged in trade with the Gulf States, others trade with neighboring countries and still others set up large factories, such as bakeries or textile mills. As women, they generally have not had access to patronage and personalistic networks tied to the state and instead are part of the emerging bourgeoisie in Africa that is not based on extracting and diverting state resources.

In Uganda the women best known for these activities are the women running the retail trade, which was largely taken over by female entrepreneurs after the expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1972 by Idi Amin. In rural areas, women—especially those living in coastal or border areas—are major traders. Take, for example, one of the most important commodities traded by women: smoked and salted fish from the Albert Nile. Not only is trade in this fish extensive, but it is also very profitable. The fish are obtained from Panyimur, Wanseko and Rhino Camps on the Albert Nile, Pawar and Jinja and are transported as far as Zaire in the west, Yei in Sudan in the north and Juba in the east (Meagher 1990).

In Tanzania professional and middle-income women would frequently leave their salaried positions to go into business or were involved in sideline enterprises. They had established large tailoring businesses, dry cleaning companies, flour mills, secretarial service companies, hair salons, export and import businesses, bakeries and other small manufacturing and service industries. The pervasiveness of such businesses among women was unprecedented, representing a phenomenon which began to emerge in a significant way only in the mid-1980s.

The emergence of this new business class whose wealth was not primarily based on the diversion of resources from the state is a phenomenon that has been described most extensively by Janet MacGaffey in the context of Zaire, where women also appear to have been espe-

cially prominent in such activities. MacGaffey calls this class of business owners "an indigenous local capitalist class," which invests in enterprises that produce for the internal and external markets. Their wealth is not based on holding political office nor is it drawn from activities based on fraud or extortion, rather it is based on business (MacGaffey 1986, 162-63). As in Uganda and Tanzania, women in Zaire have less access to formal institutions than men and therefore have tended to remain within the second economy in which economic activities are unregulated and unlicensed.

Linked to this private sector and informal economic activity in Tanzania and Uganda are a growing number of organizations of varying nature. For instance, women are increasingly joining small groups set up specifically to assist in generating income. In Uganda and Tanzania these groups are varied and are involved in farming, animal husbandry, tailoring, fishing, trade of small household items, making and selling of foodstuffs and alcohol, and services such as hairdressing. Even the older, formal women's associations such as the Mother's Union, YWCA and Catholic Women's Association are today providing training and other assistance in starting income-generating projects.¹² Yet these associations were formed prior to independence primarily to socialize women into traditional roles, provide educational opportunities, serve welfare functions and promote religious concerns.

Most women's organizations remain small and informal. Take, for example, the savings associations that have become especially popular in Tanzanian, Ugandan and other African urban centers. These associations serve as a means of saving money to reinvest in businesses, to get businesses started or to save profits which are later used for major purchases, school fees, building houses or medical expenses. In Uganda these savings clubs are frequently the basis for organizing other kinds of cooperative ventures. Some are formed within but separate from formal associations; in other words, women attending a women's church group might use this organization as a forum for organizing themselves into smaller savings clubs. In both Tanzania and Uganda these savings clubs were generally made up of women, although it was becoming increasingly common to find men also organized into such societies.

Close to half of all self-employed and employed women interviewed in the 1987-88 survey of Dar es Salaam reported belonging to associations called *upato*. Women who participated in *upato* societies made on average 26 percent more than other self-employed women, which suggests that their businesses were more stable. The societies averaged around 12 participants with each participant putting 20-100 Tsh in a kitty each day and then, after 5 days, a designated participant would claim the entire kitty. Each participant had her turn to receive the kitty. Other societies regularly pooled money every 3, 4, 7, 10, 14, or 30 days, depending on the arrangement. The amount of money

set aside by individual women added up to roughly 20 to 30 percent of their average monthly income. Women who participated in *upato* societies belonged to the 35-50 year age bracket, while self-employed women generally fell into the 20-35 year range. This can probably be explained by the greater financial demands placed on women with small children who were not in as good a position to save. Finally, women involved in the *upato* societies (61 percent) were more likely than self-employed women in general (49 percent) to have some education.

Thus, the proliferation of women's associations is tied to the new financial responsibilities that have fallen on women and the fact that women have used these new pressures to advance themselves economically and politically.

The Politics of Exclusion, the Struggle for Inclusion

The struggle for greater inclusiveness is not a new one. In fact, one of the reasons that women's groups have the potential to bridge sectarian affiliations has to do with women's common fight for inclusion in the political process and within public life. From the early 1960s up to the mid-1980s, Tanzania's ruling party, known as the Tanganyika African National Union and after 1977 as *Chama Cha Mapinduzi*, increasingly curtailed opportunities for independent organizations, especially economic ones, and attempted to bring all formal associational activity under state control while discouraging the formation of new organizations. Local women's activities were to come under the direction of the party's mass organization, *Umoja wa Wanawake wa Tanzania* (Union of Tanzanian Women). This meant that while some well-established associations like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) continued in the face of various proscriptions, most independent women's organizations were confined to being small and informal in character.

Similarly, in Uganda Idi Amin passed a decree in 1978 forming a National Council of Women. The decree declared that "no women's or girls' voluntary organizations shall continue to exist or be formed except in accordance with the provisions of this decree" (Tadria 1987). This decree pushed many professional and religious-based women's groups underground, where they functioned quietly with their activities significantly curtailed.¹³ Moreover, it prevented the formation of new organizations. After Amin's overthrow, many women's organizations felt that their autonomy continued to be jeopardized under the second regime of Milton Obote, whose party, the Uganda Peoples Congress, used its women's wing to exert political control over independent

women's associations through the then parastatal body, the National Council of Women.¹⁴

It should be added that the years of internal warfare in Uganda had profound effects on women's self-perceptions and men's perceptions of women in ways not experienced in Tanzania. It unwittingly thrust women into new roles and situations which fundamentally transformed their consciousness. Rural women found themselves talking to, harboring and feeding Tanzanian soldiers and hiding weapons in their homes during the war in which Tanzania helped oust Amin. Amin's troops did not suspect them because they were women. Women later joined the NRM and fought side by side with men. The sight of women carrying both guns and babies on their backs left an indelible impression on many. Women were involved in spying and in smuggling guns into the bush. In the cities, husbands taught their wives to drive and run their businesses in the event that they might have to disappear into the bush.¹⁵ While the fighting did not directly have an impact on women's associations, it affected women's overall perception of their capabilities (Ankrah 1987; Watson 1988).

National women's organization leaders point to the 1985 Decade of Women conference in Nairobi as a turning point in the history of Ugandan women's associations. Women activists in nongovernmental organizations, many of whom had attended on their own, independent of the official delegation, returned from the conference with a new sense of urgency to begin revitalizing and creating autonomous women's associations as part of an active women's movement. It was not possible to begin realizing this goal until the NRM came to power the following year. The NRM responded favorably to direct pressures from women's groups to place women in key leadership positions in the government. The state had been significantly weakened by the years of conflict but also by economic decline as in Tanzania. It was in no position to restrict private social and economic initiatives when it could no longer provide comparable services or ensure economic well-being. Thus, the state's position was a key determinant of the possibilities for autonomous association and women's associations in both countries.

As in the period prior to independence, voluntary associations have had an impact on the broader political arena (White 1973), serving as fora to exchange ideas and develop opinions.¹⁶ Take the example of Uganda where some of these influences on national politics have been among the most dramatic in Africa. As a result of pressure from women's organizations, the Museveni government has been compelled to address women's issues at a national level in a way not addressed by previous governments. In 1988 the Ministry of Women in Development was established, and it was merged with the Ministry of Youth and Culture in 1991. The ministry's objectives included seeking equal rights for women through changes in the law and in institutional

arrangements, integrating women's concerns in the national and district development programs, fostering women's income-generating activities and enterprises and engendering full participation in decision making within the political and development process.

In 1991 Uganda's Ministry of Women in Development coordinated a nationwide discussion of women at the local level to discuss a new constitution. Out of these discussions, a memorandum was drawn up and sent to the constitutional commission, which made an open invitation to any group or section of the population to submit memoranda. The WID memorandum addressed issues of national concern (e.g., national language), but also particular concerns of women, including the elimination of discrimination on the basis of sex, which would involve the repeal of marriage, divorce, inheritance and property laws and employment regulations that are discriminatory against women.

Although women's representation in national bodies is still numerically small, it is considerably more than five years ago as a result of direct pressure from women's groups. There were four women cabinet ministers in 1992 and a woman held the key position of minister of agriculture. Women are now represented on national commissions and parastatal boards. For example, there are 2 women out of 21 representatives on Uganda's constitutional commission that drafted the new constitution (Matembe 1991). At independence there was a 2:88 female:male ratio in parliament; in 1967 there were no female members of parliament. By 1980 there was still only 1 female out of 142 members of parliament, but after the NRM takeover the numbers significantly increased to 39 women out of 263 members, or 15 percent of the parliament.

Political representation in the Resistance Council (RC) system is more controversial.¹⁷ Women frequently mention that they take encouragement from the fact that the NRM established the RC system to include one guaranteed position for women at each of the levels. In addition, one seat was reserved for women for each district in the National Resistance Council (parliament) (Kasfir 1991, 272). Some have pointed out, however, that since both men and women vote for the women's secretary, men tend to vote for a woman who is submissive, quiet and "has a pretty face," as one woman put it. Some women activists have noted and wondered why at the NRC level the women who are elected rarely come out of the leadership of popular women's associations even though many have later become spokeswomen for women's issues (the outspoken Miria Matembe is an important exception).¹⁸ Others have argued that women are increasingly making use of the RC system as they become more politically astute. In the first RC elections in 1987, women stood for only the post of women's secretary, and there were a few cases in which men stood for the position of women's secretary because no woman would run. But by the 1992 elections, women were running for the

positions of chairman, vice chairman and finance secretary of the RCs, and there were many new women running who had never contested before.¹⁹ The visibility of women running for positions in the October 1993 constituent assembly elections has also not gone unnoticed.²⁰

Women's organizations like ACFODE and the Women Lawyers Association have been active not only in pressing for greater female leadership, but also in other areas as well. Because Uganda has the highest number of people who are HIV positive in Africa, according to World Health Organization figures, and women are the fastest growing group affected, women's groups and leaders have become vocal around issues of sexual harassment, rape, wife beating and child abuse for the first time. Uganda's women parliamentarians were instrumental in passing amendments to the penal code in 1990 that made rape a capital offense and punished hotel owners for allowing prostitution on their premises, and they have been raising the issue of teachers who sexually harass female students.

Women's groups helped draw up a domestic law bill which would give women more rights in divorce, marriage and other personal relations in which women face discrimination due to customary practices around inheritance and property rights. In the area of education, women's groups got the admissions standards lowered for women entering university in 1991 and initiated the formation of a women's studies program. Finally, ACFODE has helped the Ministry of Education introduce sex education into the curriculum for teenagers attending the upper primary school (junior high level) to address issues such as the AIDS epidemic and its relation to women's position in society.

Inclusiveness within Women's Groups

While women have pressed for greater inclusiveness within the public sphere, they have also sought greater inclusiveness within women's groups, often with noticeable success. During Amin's rule, the executive committee of the Muslim Women's Association was made up almost entirely of Nubians. Today the same body includes Batoro, Nubian, Banyoro, Banyankole and Baganda women.²¹ Unlike political parties, many women's associations are explicit about their rejection of the politics of sectarianism. In recent years, women in many parts of the country have deliberately loosened or severed their ties to organizations based on religion (such as local chapters of the Protestant Mothers Union) in order to join with women of other religions. For other women's groups the struggle has been an internal one to stem accusations of favoritism based on ethnicity. One leaflet supporting a candidate as chair for the prominent women's group ACFODE appealed for unity in the face of such rumors:

Friend, if you find yourself dividing up the ACFODE membership into subgroupings like... 'Westerners' 'Easterners,' etc. stop and think because you are then killing the ACFODE spirit of singlemindedness and substituting it for cleavages, cliques and faction—the hallmarks of anarchism and disintegration. We in ACFODE have always maturely worked together, side by side, without bothering to find out one another's nationalities or other sectional tags. All genuine lovers of ACFODE should by all means wish to uphold the original non-sectarian spirit.²²

Most of the new urban women's associations, even small informal and neighborhood associations, are not formed along sectarian lines. Because their primary motive for organizing is economic betterment rather than solidifying a primary affiliation, one's ethnic or religious background is rarely considered in forming an association such as a savings club.²³ Savings clubs are sometimes established at the workplace, be it a factory floor, office or market place. They can be formed by friends and friends of friends, neighbors, or within a larger association that has already brought women together like a church. In both Kampala and Dar es Salaam, this meant that the savings clubs connected people of various backgrounds. Of 150 women's groups whose members were interviewed in Kampala, less than a handful were formed strictly around ethnicity. The cultural organizations that are based on ethnicity usually involve both men and women. It is extremely rare to find an all-women's group of only one ethnicity. Even in rural areas, savings clubs incorporated women of different ethnicities. To take one example, within a formal rural nongovernmental organization in Busoga, Masese Low Cost Housing Women's Cooperative Group, informal savings clubs combined Basoga, Baganda, Banyankole and other ethnic groups.

Apart from the common economic goals that bring women together, another reason for these nonsectarian tendencies is that urban areas by definition have brought together people of different ethnic groups, clans and religious affiliations. Inter-marriage between couples of different ethnic groups has become much more common. New associations are thus formed in the workplace and in neighborhoods, creating new bases for community beyond particularistic interests and primary affiliations.

Yet another reason women's groups cut across particularistic ties is that married women from patrilineal societies tend to find it easier than men to form associations that cut across ethnic, clan and kinship ties. This is because once she is married a woman effectively cuts herself off from her blood kin because she is expected to join her husband's clan, but yet she is never entirely accepted into the clan of her husband and is always considered an outsider. Wives are restricted from membership of clan and kin associations. Unlike men, who are

more likely to be involved in clan or kinship associations, women from such societies find it easier to associate with people outside of their primary affiliations and can extend what anthropologists call "fictive kinship" ties to other women who are not blood relations. It is the kind of societal arrangement which forces women to establish closer ties to non-kin.²⁴

When confronted with ethnic and linguistic differences, women's groups have sought ways to work around potential problems that may arise from such diversity. The example of one savings club in Kampala illustrates this phenomenon. But first by way of background, 13 women formed the club in one complex of 24 government-owned apartments. The women came from several ethnic groups and included both Christians and Muslims. The women represented a wide range of occupations and wage levels. They included a nurse, secretary, university professor, waitress and several housewives. All the women had additional primary sources of income, most of which were informal (untaxed and unlicensed). They had individual businesses selling beer, beans, soap, second-hand clothes and books. As is common for women retailers in Kampala, one rented a few square meters of a bookstore to sell her books. Another was a consultant for foreign donor agencies and nongovernmental organizations, gave private French lessons and did French-English translations for extra money. One had a poultry shed, another ran a canteen and yet another owned a private clinic.

The group formed when one woman in the housing complex lost her husband as the result of an accident. As is the Kiganda custom, the husband's family laid claim to her children and pressured her to marry her husband's brother to finish compensating for the bridewealth payment. The neighbor women got together and found her a job as a waitress. They also helped her start a business selling second-hand clothes, called *kunkumura* in Luganda (which literally translates into "shake and see"). The woman rented a meter in a shop from which she sells the clothes. The group's joint efforts thus enabled the woman to maintain her financial independence and related individual autonomy. When a second woman in the group lost her husband to AIDS, the group intervened and convinced the housing authorities to let her keep her apartment for an additional six months until she could relocate. They also helped her with transport. She eventually had to leave, but she is still part of the group. When this second woman was widowed, the women realized how precarious their own positions were and solidified their organizational structure in a savings club.

Clearly, the main organizing principle was economic survival and mutual support rather than a primary affinity. As one member put it: The main purpose of the group is to share contacts, exchange business and other ideas, provide financial assistance for income-generating activities and give financial and other assistance in emergencies. The

women save money to pay for school and health fees, emergencies and for reinvesting in businesses. One woman used the money to complete a house that she was going to rent out.

Because the women had different religious affiliations, they went to great lengths to accommodate these differences. The group had two funds, one they contributed to regularly and another emergency fund, which they built up by catering food to the local RC and other organizations holding social functions. They consciously chose to cater on non-religious holidays like New Year so that their activities would not interfere with the various religious holidays of different group members. If they had to meet on Friday, the Christian members would consult with the Muslim members to make sure it was alright to meet without them. Because the women are of different ethnic affiliations they hold meetings in English and translate into Luganda for the women who do not speak English. Similar translating arrangements were reported by other savings clubs in Kampala where English is spoken among educated classes.

More generally, among women interviewed in Kampala, issues of religion and ethnicity were not seen as problematic. While women reported problems with raising funds, attending meetings, collecting dues, managing funds, dealing with age and education differences and dealing with husbands who objected to their participation, virtually all denied that religion and ethnicity/language had given rise to problems in their groups.

Women are so vehement in insisting that their groups are based primarily on economic concerns and not on ethnicity or religion that even groups which are active politically in advocating women's rights deny that their groups are political because of the way in which politics has been equated with sectarianism in Uganda's past. When asked whether such an organization could be a basis for broader political activity, one member explained:

We do not want these organizations to become terribly political. It would hurt too much. There would be too much pain, too much tension that we do not need right now. Everything has been so politicized along tribal, religious and party lines. Women through these organizations are rejecting that. We know the divisions exist among us, but it is more important right now to survive and to help each other out. We do not want to go back to the way it was, back to the repression, back to having to escape to the bush for fear of one's life. These organizations are non-denominational, non-tribal, non-partisan. They do not exclude anyone. The reason they are generally organized around sex is because of the gender division in our culture.²⁵

This is an interesting position, especially coming from a woman who is in the leadership of a women's rights organization. This kind of position was reiterated by other women leaders as well. When asked

whether multiparty politics would help or hinder an organization like ACFODE, which has been especially active in promoting female leadership in government and in promoting women's rights, its general secretary, Margaret Kikamphikaho, was quick to reply: "We don't talk about things like that. We are not into politics." As far as she was concerned, party affiliations, along with their related ethnic and religious affiliations, were seen as too divisive to raise in her organization. Clearly, even though women may be intensely involved in public activities, they define politics as a divisive activity that women do not engage in because it is associated with parties which in Uganda are organized along religious and regional lines.

It would be a serious distortion to suggest by this that ethnic, religious and other kinds of politics based on particularistic ties fall along gender lines. But the sentiments of the women cited here do suggest that many women, through their new associational activity, are pursuing a kind of politics that is more inclusive in its orientation and see economic necessity and survival strategies as bases for organizing along more inclusive lines.

Ensuring Accountability

One of the consequences of the fact that groups are not based on affective ties—familial, clan, ethnic or other close ties—as in many rural areas is that forms of accountability have had to be developed. While it may be a long struggle to institutionalize ways to ensure accountability, it is worth considering what various women's groups have accomplished in this regard. The National Organization for Women's Associations of Uganda (formerly the National Council of Women) has reported a significant rise in the number of women's groups seeking assistance from them in drafting constitutions, suggesting a greater need for establishing structures to guarantee accountability.²⁶ Even the most informal savings clubs studied in both Kampala and Dar es Salaam had created mechanisms, including drawing up constitutions, to strengthen accountability. This was the case regardless of how much the members emphasized the importance of trust, and irrespective of the size of the club. One Kampala club with only 13 members, each of whom contributed 1,500 Ush (\$1.50) a month, had a chairperson, deputy chairperson, treasurer, secretary and deputy assistant who comprised the executive committee. They needed at least two present from the executive committee in order to make a decision and at least four members of the executive committee present to approve the application of a new member, which had to be made in writing. Similar kinds of arrangements were found in Dar es Salaam, where even among illiterate women a secretary-treasurer (*kijumbe*) would be appointed to collect

the money and redistribute it. Sometimes she herself could not belong to the society. In larger societies, participants provided the names of next of kin who were responsible for making payments if the participants failed to do so.

Take another example of a fairly typical informal (unregistered) group, Namasuba Pinda Zone Women's Club in Kampala, which is made up of 16 members representing several ethnic groups, Protestants, Catholics and Muslims. The women vary in their levels of education, with occupations ranging from secretaries to housewives, traders to teachers. The group, which is involved in drama and singing, handicrafts, and farming and animal husbandry, was formed in 1986 by a woman who, according to its members, thought women should be self-sustaining and develop independently. The group has a chairperson, general secretary, information secretary, secretary for mobilization, sports secretary, head of the weaving section, project manager and treasurer. Elections are conducted annually by lining up behind the person one prefers. In spite of the organization's informality, it is governed by several bylaws, which one member elaborated:

Number one, a member must be trustworthy. Number two, well, if there is anything to be done and it involves large sums of money, we don't let an individual handle it alone. We choose three members to assist in carrying out the task. It is hard then for one person to waste the money. We keep our money with the treasurer and she banks it. There are four members who sign on the check if the money is to be released by the bank. Third, there is the discipline law, a woman must behave like a woman [not commit adultery, drink a lot, etc.]. If you are not behaving well, then you face the disciplinary committee for punishment. The final bylaw concerns dress: women must dress decently in our club.

These fit patterns of proceduralism found in other parts of Africa in associations such as student groups, women's organizations and self-help groups that hold elections, operate according to constitutional guidelines and have clear-cut mechanisms for changes in administration (Chazan 1982; Little 1973).

Thus the struggle to pluralize associations is intricately linked to the need for greater accountability so that associations do not fall prey to the same kind of ethnically based favoritism that pervades government and public institutions, especially in the way appointments are made. This has had consequences beyond the issue of ascriptive ties. For example, in the 1980s many organizations of physically disabled people were monopolized by individuals who used them to enhance their own positions. Today, members are demanding greater accountability and throwing out corrupt leaders while others have formed new groups because the old ones did not serve their purposes. One woman, for example, left a physically handicapped women's group and joined the

Disabled Women's Association of Mukono because, as she put it, "the leader was unfair and gained a lot from us. She took all the foreign trips and offered herself the aid meant for us."

Another aspect of the inclusiveness of many groups is the way in which they combine different educational and income levels. Professional and middle class women's associations have formed explicitly with the intention of involving low-income women in their organizations and of providing services to rural or low-income women. In Uganda, ACFODE works primarily with rural women, carrying out seminars and helping women initiate efforts around a variety of issues, ranging from health, family planning, legal rights and politics to income-generating projects. The Legal Aid Clinic of the Uganda Association of Women Lawyers carries out education around marriage, divorce, succession, affiliation, land, commercial and constitutional laws which affect women. In 1988 they opened a legal aid clinic to provide low-income women with free legal counseling and litigation. The Uganda Women's Credit and Finance Trust also works with low-income women to provide them with credit and technical and training assistance in starting and sustaining micro-businesses. Even organizations like the Tanzania Businesswomen's Association, which was initiated by wealthier businesswomen, included as part of its constituency poor women involved in income-generating activities and wanted to form with them a strong business community of women.

Certainly, not all the women's service organizations are formed with purely altruistic motives. In fact, the government temporarily froze the establishment of new orphanages in 1992 because it was brought to the authorities' attention (by women leaders) that some of these orphanages were nothing more than money-making schemes with the interests of children of peripheral concern to the women who started the institutions.

Problematizing Civil Society

The existence of these new women's organizations poses numerous challenges to emerging concepts of civil society. In Western political thought, civil society has been variously described as a relational concept: civil society connects state and society and at the same time acts independently outside of the state. Similarly, many have characterized civil society in the African context as the part of society that interacts with the state to influence its conduct and yet is simultaneously autonomous from it (Chazan 1991). Some have characterized civil society as an oppositional force to the state (Bayart 1986; Chabal 1986). Others such as Michael Bratton have adopted Alfred Stepan's distinction between political society, which includes political parties,

elections and legislatures, and civil society, which encompasses neighborhood associations, women's groups, and religious groups (Bratton 1989, 417-18). And for still others, the defining characteristic is the location of civil society, between the family and the state (Barkan 1991).

Thus, most definitions of civil society appear to revolve around the part of society that interacts with the state. As Walzer puts it, the state "both frames civil society and occupies space within it. It fixes the boundary conditions and the basic rules of all associational activity (including political activity)" (1991, 302). A focus on this particular relationship is problematic because, while it may capture some of the many changes occurring in African politics, it may also overlook the complexity of some of the more fundamental political, economic and social transformations taking place that do not fall easily into the state-society dualism that civil society implies.

The experience of associational life in Uganda and Tanzania raises the question of whether these fundamental disjunctures between state and society can be resolved by invoking the concept of civil society that comes out of a very different Western configuration of state-society relations. In other words, how applicable is the notion of civil society in the African context where the state was a colonial implant, did not emerge from social structures within society itself and the post-colonial state did not fundamentally renegotiate the bases of state-society interactions? Is it a useful concept where state-society interactions are often characterized by the use of patronage networks to extract cheap/free state resources, services or to acquire jobs? What does it mean in countries where the state is weak and barely autonomous from society and is infused by personalistic rule and patrimonial politics that cater to ethnic, religious and other particularistic interests? Women's groups and other associations have often situated themselves outside this sphere of state influence precisely because it does not serve their interests and at times has undermined those same interests.

The view that the state determines the basic rules of associational activity cannot be taken for granted in societies where those very rules are in dispute and are being contested, often through noncompliance. As Migdal has argued, noncompliance in such instances is not simply personal deviance, criminality or corruption, but involves a fundamental conflict over which organizations in society should make the rules and what the rules should be (Migdal 1988). The battle over which institutions should hold sway in allocating authority may be quite explicit at times: In some localities in Uganda and Tanzania, the church is clearly the dominant institution. In Buganda, monarchism has been revived with a forcefulness not seen in Uganda since the death of the exiled Buganda King Mutesa in 1969. Where women's groups have replaced state efforts in the provision of social services the state's

centrality is diminished. At the same time, the idea that the state frames the rules of associational life can be questioned in contexts in which patronage and corruption increasingly dominate state institutions while many (not all) autonomous associations are struggling to create new rules that would enhance accountability.

In other instances the conflict over who makes the rules manifests itself in nonengagement of the state. With the drying up of state resources due to economic crisis and the imposition of economic liberalization, often under pressure from international financial institutions and donors, it has become increasingly common to find the creation of economic and political spaces outside of the state. In some situations it involves nonengagement of the state, simply because the state has become financially and organizationally too weak to provide basic social, welfare and public services that it once provided. It also includes the creation of wealth by independent entrepreneurs, wealth that is not derived from state coffers directly or indirectly, legally or illegally. Nonengagement in some contexts does not preclude that the same individuals or groups might not engage the state in other situations given the multidimensional nature of people's lives. It simply suggests that people, and women in particular, have had to rely more heavily on their own individual and collective resources for health, education and other social services. Even personal security is provided by local citizens' groups throughout both Uganda and Tanzania.

There are many new and important national women's organizations in both Tanzania and Uganda that engage the state by lobbying for women's political leadership and for changes in laws that discriminate against women. By the same token, there are many local women's groups that do not engage the state, yet are vital to the welfare of their communities precisely because the state has so little impact in making these provisions. It would therefore seem necessary to look at the whole spectrum of institutional changes occurring in Africa today and not simply at those organizations that engage the state in a particular way.

The concept of civil society tends to revive modernization preoccupations with linear and evolutionary political development. It lends itself to analyses that push nonformal associations, regardless of how recently constituted, into the category of *traditional*, only to fall outside of civil society, which itself comes to mean modern institutions that espouse liberal democratic values. An analysis of the organizational changes in Uganda and Tanzania suggests that it is not possible to *a priori* categorize organizations without looking at the role they in fact play. So-called modern, registered, middle class associations may be infused with particularistic interests, while small, informal organizations that do not interact with the state may be horizontally structured to include heterogeneous memberships operating along strict

guidelines to ensure accountability. Where opportunities exist, small local women's groups in urban areas are every bit as likely to form along multiethnic lines as any group of middle class, highly educated women.

At the minimum, the idea of a civil society-state dichotomy is or ought to be problematic for theorists of liberalization and democratization in a continent such as Africa. Some have cautioned against transferring abstract concepts derived from particular conditions in the West to other contexts without considering the complex ways in which they have evolved in the West and the varying meanings and reality of civil society in the West (Taylor 1990). Others have taken the critique even further and argued that one should not take concepts developed out of the particularities of Western society and claim that they are universal when they are nothing more than a particular form of a more universal concept (Chatterjee 1990). Surprisingly, most of the new debate around civil society in developing countries has sidestepped the most trenchant critiques of the use of the concept that have emerged out of feminist political theory. Most of these critiques have shown how Western political theorists have treated civil society as undifferentiated, while in fact defining citizenship, the public domain and individual rights as male privilege (Elshtain 1981; Pateman 1983; Phillips 1991; Okin 1990; Yeatman 1984).

The issue here is not that concepts that have relevance in the West are not applicable elsewhere or vice versa. Nevertheless, it is important to pay attention to the particular historical contexts that give rise to concepts like civil society that have now gained currency in the worldwide discussion of democratization. Moreover, dualities like civil society/state that fall into public-private conceptualizations are problematic even in the West when they have been used to define public activity in a way that excludes certain categories of people (Elshtain 1981).

Certainly it would be simpler and theoretically more satisfying to describe developments in Africa in ways that afford greater cross-national comparability and in terms that correspond to the popular terminology of social transformations occurring elsewhere in the world, given the apparent similarity in trends. But this does not change the fact that notions such as "civil society" do not comfortably describe the changes in associational life, capital formation and state-society interactions being experienced in many parts of Africa today. In Uganda and Tanzania these changes are so dramatic as to constitute a major social transformation. These circumstances suggest that we need new conceptual tools and frameworks with which to understand these changes.

Conclusions

Although there are many useful critiques of the concept of civil society that are not addressed in this paper (e.g., the feminist theorists' insights into the gendered interpretations of civil society), this paper adopts the line of argument that civil society is not a universal concept, but rather is a construct that has evolved out of the specific Western historical context and is, as Chatterjee suggests, a particular form of a more universal concept (1990). While the meanings of civil society have many parallels with associational life in non-Western contexts, they cannot automatically be transposed without looking at the particular ways in which state, society and capital have evolved in relation to one another. To do so obscures more than it reveals.

The notion that the state frames civil society and the emphasis on accountability in formal modern institutions are examples of perspectives embedded in the concept of civil society that are unable to account for many important features of changing associational life in Africa today. For example, women's informal and formal associations have proliferated in part due to new opportunities afforded by liberalizing states, which have significantly less resources at their disposal and have therefore been forced to allow more political and economic space to nongovernmental actors. But the increase in women's organizations is also affected by the economic crisis that has placed greater pressures on women to meet household needs through various individual and collective strategies. Because women have particular responsibilities around caring for the old, the children, the sick and covering health and school expenses, they have been more likely to involve themselves in organizations providing social and welfare services and economically based associations. It has been in these contexts equally important to consider women's nonengagement of the state and reliance on their own resources as it has been to look at their associational interaction and dependence on the state.

Because the basis of women's associations tends to be survival and economic advantage, urban women tend to organize themselves in both formal and informal, large and small associations that cut across ethnic, religious and other particularistic lines. Ironically, even though women may belong to organizations that lobby for women's rights and are politically active in a conventional sense, they themselves frequently identify formal politics in their countries as being the pursuit of particularistic interests that should be avoided at all costs because of the divisive nature of activities based along such lines. Thus, the public spiritedness, active participatory involvement and inclusiveness of many of these associations are characteristics that could be drawn on in thinking about institutional reform. Similarly, some of the mechanisms

of accountability found even in small informal associations need to be examined in carrying out institutional development.

The other issue that this paper addresses is whether small and informal associations that are formed to meet everyday needs can have broader political impact and whether they could, for example, fundamentally affect the position of women. This paper argues that by organizing to meet their everyday needs, women in self-help groups, voluntary associations, savings associations and other such groups are responding to the fact that they have been excluded not only from formal economies but also from formal politics. They are ultimately redefining politics by seeking tangible solutions to problems caused by the vagaries of the market and the failure, negligence or outright repression of the state. It is important to see the practically oriented organizations as forming a part of a broader web of associations that as a whole can effect more basic change. But more to the point, even the economically oriented organizations have brought about transformations in the political consciousness of women which have in fact led to political change.

It is thus possible, without romanticizing such organizations or exaggerating their transformative capacity, to discern bases for institutional reform that would make political participation more participatory, public spirited and inclusive and make leadership more accountable. Women in these new and often unassuming organizations have attempted to reclaim the necessary space to define their own needs, formulate their own organizational strategies and rely on their own abilities, and this has brought about a change in consciousness. One Kampala women entrepreneurs' group captured the essence of this particular moment in Uganda's associational history when they named themselves "*Togaya kye zinze*," which literally translates into "do not discard a rolled up piece of paper," understood to mean "do not dismiss what appears to be insignificant."

Notes

1. This article is based on a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, 3-6 September 1992. I would like to thank Michael Schatzberg, James C. Scott, Ron Kassimir, Susan Dicklich and Juliet Kiguli for helpful comments on this paper.
2. The coronation of *Ssabataka* (Prince) Ronald Mutebi in July 1993 and the government's promise to return the Baganda cultural sites known as *ebyaffe* (our things) are part of a renewal of monarchism not seen since the country's first president Milton Obote abolished Uganda's kingdoms in 1966 as undemocratic and unconstitutional.
3. One manifestation of the souring of Christian-Muslim relations occurred in April 1993 when Muslim fundamentalists went on a rampage smashing shops that sold pork (*New Vision* 30 April 1993).

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4. This sentiment was reflected, for example, in an 18 April 1993 BBC interview with Tanzanian businessmen Allan Sykes who came out openly called for the expulsion of Asians from Tanzania.
5. The study in Uganda also involved a stratified random survey of 1200 households in four urban centers (80 percent women, 20 percent men) on associational participation and political participation. The results of this survey had not been analyzed at the time of this writing.
6. The response rate for the cluster survey was 99 percent. For survey questionnaire, see Appendix B of Aili Mari Tripp, "The Urban Informal Economy and the State in Tanzania," Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1990.
7. Lucia Kiwale, interview conducted by author, June 1992.
8. Approximately 50 percent of Uganda's population is Catholic, 26 percent Anglican (Church of Uganda), and 7 percent Muslim.
9. In the 1987 elections, the DP reported winning 84 percent of the RC5 seats, while the UPC and NRM won 7 percent each (Kasfir 1991, 255). Democratic Party leaders have been brought into top positions in the government.
10. *New Vision* 1 May 1993.
11. Legally any Ugandan, male or female, can purchase or acquire title to land according to the Land Reform Decree, No. 3 of 1975.
12. Florence Nekyon, interview conducted by author, 21 May 1993; J. B. Kwesiga, interview conducted by author, 30 May 1993.
13. These included organization like the Catholic Women's Association, Mothers Union, YWCA, Muslim Mother's Association, Muslim Women's Association, Uganda Midwives and Nurses.
14. Lucia Kiwale, interview conducted by author, June 1992.
15. Ruth Kisubika, interview conducted by author, 8 June 1992.
16. Historically, voluntary associations have had an impact on the broader political scene. During the colonial period, the authorities placed restrictions on formal organized activity, leaving it up to more informal voluntary associations and primary groups to serve as the bases from which the nationalists mobilized support for independence. In Tanzania, for example, groups ranging in diversity from the *beni* dance societies, burial societies and ethnically based hometown associations and football clubs, and African Association which drew together middle class professionals and civil servants served as precursors to the Tanganyika Africa Nationalist Union. In other parts of Africa, the voluntary associations were often the precursors of the nationalist movement, providing forums for advancing anticolonial ideas (Chazan 1982, 172; Wallerstein 1964, 331).
17. The Resistance Council system is a hierarchical one in which all adults belong to their village RC and elect nine members to the executive committee at this first level of RC1. All RC1 executive committees in a parish form RC2. RC3 is formed similarly out of the RC2s at the subcounty level, and the RC3s form RC5 at the district level, skipping the county level (Nsibambi 1991, 279). The National Resistance Council, the highest governing body or parliament, includes 38 original NRC members who had been core NRM cadre during the guerrilla war and 20 members appointed by the President. The NRA Council, which is the highest decision making body in the army, selects another 10 members. Thus one quarter of the seats are selected by the NRM leaders, while the remainder of the 284 seats are selected by RC3s (Kasfir 1991).
18. Discussion, Olivia Mutibwa, 5 June 1992.
19. Irene Wekiya, NRC women's representative, interview conducted by author, Jinja, 30 March 1993.
20. Samuel Muwanguzi, "Will the Women Beat Men?" *Weekly Topic*, 4 June 1993, 22.

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21. Hajati Nantongo, acting Chairman of the Uganda Muslim Women's Association, interview conducted by author, 27 March 1993.
22. Letter by Dr. R. G. Mukama in support of Joy Kwesiga as Chairperson of ACFODE in 1993 election.
23. In Uganda savings clubs go by various names: *kilab* (club) in Lusoga, cash round, *munno mukabi* (mutual aid, wealth, investment) in Luganda; *kalulu* (throw lots) or *emi-gabo* (shares) in Ankole. In Tanzania, where Kiswahili is widely spoken, the savings clubs are known simply as *upato* (something obtained), *upatu*, *kisahani* (small dish) or *mchezo* (game).
24. Discussion with Harriet Birungi 26 June 1992.
25. Edith Natakunda, interview conducted by author, 2 June 1992.
26. Florence Nekyon, interview conducted by author, 21 May 1993.

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