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Title: Tiny Citizenship, Twisted Politics, and Christian Love in a Ugandan Church Choir

Year: 2022

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Alava, H. (2022). Tiny Citizenship, Twisted Politics, and Christian Love in a Ugandan Church Choir. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 31(4), 374-401.

<https://doi.org/10.53228/njas.v31i4.964>

Tiny Citizenship, Twisted Politics, and Christian Love in a Ugandan Church Choir

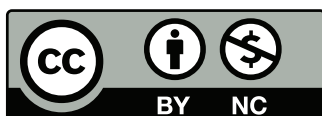
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Abstract

In 1977, the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Janani Luwum, was killed under orders from President Idi Amin following his public criticism of Amin's reign of terror. This article offers an ethnographic case study of a choir named in Luwum's honour to extend existing research on the interrelations of Christianity, citizenship, and politics in contemporary Uganda. To do so, I draw a number of conceptual tools – *tiny citizenship*, *authentic citizenship*, *twisted politics*, and *love* – from work by and referencing Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and Gary Alan Fine. First, analyzing the choir's participation in the national commemoration of Janani Luwum Day at Uganda's State House in 2021, I argue that the possibility of authentic citizenship in the Ugandan national public is constrained by twisted politics. At the State House, the Church of Uganda effectively dismissed Luwum's activist legacy and consolidated its clientelist relationship with the increasingly authoritarian NRM state, thus contributing to the further shrinking of political space in Uganda. Second, I analyze the Janani Luwum Choir's daily practices, and the ideals and rhetorics nurtured at them, as an example of a tiny public. I argue that the tiny citizenship fostered by the choir is compatible with the expectations the Ugandan state has of its citizens. Yet in a national, regional, and church context marked by long-term conflict, exclusionary politics, and low levels of trust, the choir also stands out. As a space characterized by love, care, egalitarianism, and the maintenance of harmony, it offers its members a vision and experience of a different world.

Keywords: Anglican Church, citizenship, Janani Luwum, northern Uganda, politics, religion

DOI: 10.53228/njas.v31i4.964



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About the author

Henni Alava's post-doctoral research in Development Studies at the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) concerned the interrelations of citizenship and gender in Uganda. Her book *Christianity, Politics and the Afterlives of War in Uganda: "There is Confusion"* was published in 2022 by Bloomsbury Academic. Currently she is conducting ethnographic research on pediatric persistent pain in Finland, as a member of the discipline of Gender Studies at Tampere University.

Acknowledgements

I warmly thank all members of the Janani Luwum Choir for accepting me as a member of the choir, and for committing time to answering my many questions over the years. Particular thanks to choir leader David Acellam and to staff and other members at Kitgum Town Parish for their time and support. Thank you also to Rom Lawrence for transcribing group interviews with the choir and to members of the Citizenship and Development research group, Tiina Kontinen and Elina Oinas for comments on earlier drafts, and to Marie-Louise Karttunen for language editing. This research was conducted with funding from the Academy of Finland's DEVELOP-programme as part of the project "Theory and practice of learning to be a citizen: Experiences from Tanzania and Uganda" (decision numbers 316098 and 316100).

A choir family, a killer president

Many people now fear our president,
because he has the power to make you
wealthy, he can even kill you.

The choir is like a family.

The choir is just joyful and peaceful...it
makes us to be like angels.

Every evening from Monday to Saturday, the men and women of the Janani Luwum Choir (hereafter referred to as the JLC) gather outside the church of Kitgum Town Parish for choir practice. They take plastic chairs from the church to form a circle, men on one side, women on the other, while greetings are exchanged and the latest talk of town and church is passed around and discussed. Once a sufficient group has gathered, practice begins, its content depending on whether the choir merely needs to prepare hymns for the following Sunday's church service or whether some special event is on the horizon: a wedding, a thanksgiving celebration, or, as happened twice in 2021, an invited performance at Uganda's State House. After some shuffling of papers to locate the correct hymn, the choir leader provides the opening harmony and counts everyone in: "One, two, three, we go!" Once dusk falls, singing ceases and the choir chairperson leads a discussion on topical matters, such as fund-raising for new gowns or arrangements for upcoming events. Choristers are then called to share any pressing matters at home and pass on updates from choir members who are absent, perhaps due to travel, studies, or sickness. Standing up, everyone in the circle then joins hands and an alternating choir member covers all the raised issues in prayer, finally prompting all those present to conclude with words from The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians (2 Cor 13:13): "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be

with you all, now and forever. Amen."

What do the gatherings and performances of the JLC have to do with citizenship or politics? On first glance, the space of choir practice is strictly nonpolitical: political parties or individual politicians are never named unless the latter have invited the choir to sing at thanksgivings arranged in their homes, as they often do. In these cases, the choir attends so as to share the Gospel, regardless of the political leanings of the audience. Nor do choir members talk about classic civic responsibilities like voting; hymns are sung in exactly the same way regardless of where Uganda is on the election cycle. Moreover, the man after whom the choir was named, Archbishop Janani Luwum of the (Anglican) Church of Uganda, is considered a spiritual rather than political role model, even though it was Luwum's vocal opposition to the brutality of President Idi Amin that led Amin to order his death in February 1977. Following an understanding of citizenship as membership or active participation in the affairs of a polity such as the state, one could surmise that there is nothing political about the choir, and that whatever it is they do together, it is not citizenship. Yet an analysis of what the choir stands for in the context of contemporary Ugandan politics leads me to argue against such narrow conceptions of citizenship and politics. Instead, I seek to show why these concepts merit critical unpacking and reflection (see also Alava 2022).

Anthropologists and development scholars have critiqued dominant approaches to citizenship for their West-centric, statist, and legalistic underpinnings, and highlighted that, regardless of legal status or formal rights, many citizens are *de facto* excluded from enjoying the rights their legal status confers upon them (Holston 1999; Kabeer 2005; Lazar 2019). Complementing this literature, I argue that, despite the choir's formally apolitical stance, it can be interpreted as a site of "alternative expressions of citizenship, decency and respect" (Oinas, Onodera, and Suurpää 2017, 11). Indeed, the line of think-

ing that inspires this special issue (see Alava and Kontinen this issue, as well as Holma and Kontinen 2019a; 2022) invites us to consider how people's citizenship practices and habits are formed in everyday interactions, including in seemingly apolitical spaces. Yet the choir's invitation to perform for the president at State House also provides an example of citizens' participation in political spaces, and their very tangible encounters with the state. By analysing the choir's everyday interactions and their State House visit alongside each other, the article provides insight into a central concern of citizenship studies – the relationship between 'everyday' citizenship (Lister et al. 2003) and citizenship as a relation to the state – and into how it unfolds in contemporary Uganda.

In the case I analyse, religion is a central factor shaping these relationships. As I will discuss in detail, many classic citizenship ideals, including those advanced by Hannah Arendt, have considered religion anathema in terms of the creation of a public and authentic citizenship. Such views have in recent decades been subject to thorough-going critique (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2006; Taylor 2007), so much so that, entering the 2020s in African Studies, it would seem absurd to propose that a serious account of politics in the region could afford to bypass religion as a public force (Alava 2022). Africanist scholars have developed multiple approaches to this task, some centring on Christianity's impact on formal politics (Gifford 1995; Hansen 1984; Phiri 2001; Sabar 2001; Okuku 2003; Ward 2005), others focused on the political nature of African Christianity itself (Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2010; Bongmba 2016; Ellis and ter Haar 2004; Englund 2011; Kastfelt 2004; Katongole 2011; van Klinken 2019), and yet others reflecting specifically on Christian citizenship (Bompani and Valois 2017; van Klinken and Obadare 2018).¹ In the coming pages, I seek to extend this literature by putting the concepts

¹ Parallel and resonant conversations concern Islam in Africa, see for instance Mahmood (2011), Nguyahambi and Kontinen (2020), Sounaye (2017), Schulz (2010).

of *authentic citizenship*, *tiny citizenship*, *twisted politics*, and *love to work* in an analysis of the JLC.

The statements quoted at the opening of this article – made by choir members at different times of my research on churches and politics in war-affected northern Uganda – provide a cue to my central claims. They capture views that many of my research interlocutors held of the choir of which they were members, and the presidentially-led Ugandan state of which they were citizens. President Yoweri Museveni, who has led Uganda ever since his National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/NRM)² took power in 1986, was deemed to have the power to kill – a reference to the widespread rumours about the mysterious deaths of NRM critics (see Alava 2022, Chapter 5; Tapscott 2021). The choir, in contrast, was described as family: as peaceful, joyful, and capable of making its members 'to be like angels'. I argue that the comment about the president is a reflection on contemporary state-citizen relations in Uganda, where citizenship unfolds in a national public tainted by violence, inequality, and neglect. In contrast, the comments about the choir relate to what I call the tiny citizenship practiced in the choir, a "tiny public" (Fine 2012) characterized by equality, commitment and care.

To unpack the relationship between these two different citizenships, I approach the JLC through two analytical lenses, one building on a Hannah Arendt (1958; 2005)-inspired normative vision of citizenship, the other on Gary Alan Fine's (2012; 2021) empirical analysis of small group dynamics, together with certain criticisms of Arendt's perspective. The two lenses can be condensed into four contrasting propositions concerning citizenship, publics and politics. First, from an Arendtian perspective: 1) *authentic citizenship* emerges

² NRA was the military arm and NRM the political arm of Yoweri Museveni's rebel movement. The NRM became the ruling political party following the 1986 coup, while NRA became the national army, which was renamed Uganda People's Defence Forces in 1995.

from the interaction of strangers in a public; 2) *the public* rests on its strict separation from the private and social; 3) both neighbourly and intimate *love* is anathema to *authentic politics*; and, finally, 4) *twisted politics* is best confronted through the cultivation of *authentic citizenship*. In contrast, from Gary Alan Fine's theory of *tiny publics*, and from particular critiques of Arendt, I draw these proposals: 1) *tiny citizenship* emerges in interactions within small groups; 2) the *tiny public* is a *hinge* between the public and the private; 3) meaningful public engagement can be animated by love and care; 4) it is often not possible to confront twisted politics through anything other than tiny citizenship. Viewing the JLC and its encounter with the Ugandan state through these parallel lenses enables me to present a political critique of the limits imposed upon citizens' freedoms by the Ugandan state, but also to consider what citizens can do within those limits. I take up this task through two analytical steps.

First, I describe the State House commemoration of Janani Luwum Day to which the choir was invited as a performance of statehood (Alava 2022), and reflect on this performance in light of Hannah Arendt's notion of authentic politics. I argue that because of the nature of twisted politics (O'Gorman 2020) in the Ugandan national arena, very little space exists for what, by extending Arendt's terms, can be referred to as authentic citizenship. Instead, citizenship is by and large subdued by the power and violence of the state. Second, I shift my attention from the choir's performance at State House to the choir's daily practices in Kitgum. Building on Gary Alan Fine's work on tiny publics, and on a critique of how Hannah Arendt dismissed James Baldwin's (1962) views on love and politics, I contend that small groups like church choirs are important hinges (Fine 2021) between the individual and the state. In these spaces, citizens become communities and the practices and habits of citizenship (Holma and Kontinen 2019a) are moulded. As such, tiny publics have bearing

on how citizens engage (or withdraw from) broader politics, including the state. Because they create networks of neighbourly love, care, and trust, tiny publics may be particularly significant in countries where citizens cannot experience the state as caring or trustworthy – even more so in war-affected communities where *distrust* is the norm and trust grows only over time (Meinert 2015).

The article draws on the periods I have spent with the JLC since 2012 over the course of altogether 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Uganda. During the first four months of 2013 I sang with the choir three-four times every week, as also on later trips, each a few weeks in length, in 2015, 2016, and 2019. Being considered a member of the choir has been deeply meaningful for me, both personally and analytically: experiencing first-hand the mechanisms that weave the choir together – singing, praying and banter, showing mutual care and empathy, committing to the choir's goals, and contributing time and resources – has provided essential insights into the arguments I develop in the coming pages. In addition to my observant participation in the choir, the analysis builds on fieldwork notes and recorded interviews with choir members over the years, as well as on an anonymous questionnaire and group interviews which I conducted in 2019 explicitly with citizenship in mind.³ I also draw on research I conducted at a distance in 2021 and 2022: by telephone and WhatsApp, and on YouTube, where the State House festivities on Janani Luwum Day have been available ever since they were broadcast live on Ugandan national television in February 2021 (UBC Television Uganda 2021).

³ The questionnaire was answered by 34 members, 9 male and 25 female, which is approximately 80% of those who attended practice weekly at the time. All unattributed quotes in the article are from either personal or group interviews with members, or from the questionnaire. I present all quotes without reference to names or pseudonyms so as to protect individual choir members' anonymity – a necessary consideration when some comments are critical of church or state leaders.

Before analysing this event and making the analytical steps I outline above, allow me to introduce the JLC and the contexts which illuminate the quotes – about the angel-like family of the choir and the killer president – with which I opened.

Hymns, citizenship and state violence in Uganda

The JLC speaks to a long history of intertwined relationships between church, state, and citizenship in Uganda. The choir's repertoire consists almost exclusively of old Anglican hymns from the Church of Uganda hymnal, which was initially introduced by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) during the time of British colonial and missionary expansion in Uganda. Buganda and other kingdoms in the region were already being forced into alliances with the British by the late 1800s (Crichton 2017), although the acephalous chieftaincies of Acholi, where the climate was less hospitable than in the Central region and resistance to colonialism was fierce, only came under colonial rule in the early 1900s (Atkinson 2010; Finnström 2008). Missionaries worked hard to 'civilize' the Acholi to submit to the new rules and taxes of their white rulers (Alava 2022).

Despite the violence of the missionary-colonial legacy – one which was ruthlessly critiqued by Ugandan scholars of the early independence era (Allen 2018; p'Bitek 1972) but is barely acknowledged in contemporary Acholi (Alava 2019; Whitmore 2013) – the competing Anglican and Catholic missionary churches eventually gained large followings among Ugandans, with the Catholics gaining a particularly notable foothold and growing larger than the Anglican Church in Acholi and other parts of northern Uganda. Alongside the provision of healthcare, the emphasis on education, with competing schools started

by the missions, was to prove foundational for the emerging nation and its first parties (Hansen 1984; Ochwada 2007; Leys 1967). To be considered worthy colonial subjects, Ugandans had to be baptized Christians, while to work for the colonial government, they had to be specifically baptized Anglican. The Anglican Church of Uganda emerged as a *de facto* state church, to the extent that the Anglican-affiliated Uganda People's Congress, which held power for much of Uganda's early independence decades, was commonly referred to as the "United Protestants of Canterbury" (Howell 2017).

Uganda gained independence in 1962, and during the tumultuous leadership of Presidents Milton Obote (an Anglican Langi, 1966-1971 & 1980-1985) and Idi Amin (a Muslim Kakwa, 1971-1979), its centre of political power moved from the Central region towards the greater North – a process in which religion and politics were as complexly entwined as they had been under colonialism (Ward 2005). In Acholi, the UPC was strongly influenced by members of the East African Revival, the charismatic Anglican revival movement locally known as Balokole (Ward and Wild-Wood 2012). One of the influential Acholis who grew up with the revival was Janani Luwum, a son of the village of Mucwini in Kitgum district, who eventually became Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Bogo-Zaire, and Congo. As Idi Amin's dictatorial reign in Uganda became increasingly deadly, Luwum tried to use his position as archbishop to speak out against the violence, through his connections within Amin's cabinet, through shared statements by the church, and through direct communication with the president (Ward 2002). In 1977, soon after a final visit to the State House in Entebbe, where Amin resided, Luwum was accused by Amin of having taken part in a plot to overthrow him and was murdered shortly

after (Otunnu n.d.; Ward 2002).⁴ Today, Luwum is considered a saint by the global Anglican Communion. Since 2016, the day of his death has been a national holiday in Uganda, on which a commemorative service is arranged at his graveside in Mucwini, Kitgum, with key members of the political elite in attendance. The anthem written in his honour is among the songs most regularly sung at the JLC, where members carry the name and legacy of their patron saint with great pride.

On the heels of decades of unstable and violent regimes, Uganda's incumbent president, Yoweri Museveni, took power in 1986, bringing peace to parts of the country and chaos to others. In Acholi – a stronghold of the regime of the previous president, Milton Obote – atrocities by Museveni's NRA (see Branch 2003; Schulz 2020) triggered resistance that took on violently millenarian forms, culminating in Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). During the more than 20 years of war that ensued, up to two million civilians were stranded in displacement camps and regularly brutalized by the warring parties for alleged allegiance to the opposing forces (Dolan 2009). Intermeshed in the war were shifting dynamics of international justice and military aid and humanitarianism, alongside regional conflicts and the tensions of Ugandan state-making and myriad local dynamics (Finnström 2008; Lamwaka 2016). While the war between rebel movements and the NRM raged in Acholi, conflict also tore at the Church of Uganda in Kitgum. As I

discuss at length elsewhere (Alava 2022, Chapter 7), accusations of bad leadership, clan-based nepotism, and 'un-Anglican practices' led a large group calling themselves the 'Concerned Christians' (CC) to leave the church, among them numerous JLC members.

One of the 'un-Anglican practices' of which the presiding Bishop of Kitgum was accused was his participation in a cleansing prayer led by Pentecostal pastors after his claimed abduction and subsequent release by LRA rebels. The CC's accusations that their bishop had meddled with Pentecostals in an unsuitable way could be read as a symptom of Anglican discomfort with the shifts in religious dynamics under Museveni's rule (Alava and Ssentongo 2016; Bompani 2016; Musana, Crichton, and Howell 2017). While the Catholic Church has always had a larger following in independent Uganda than the Anglican, it has never had as close a relationship with the state as has its Anglican counterpart. In recent decades, however, the Church of Uganda has had to relinquish its earlier unique ties with the state. Although the president comes from an Anglican background, he has repeatedly reprimanded church leaders whenever they have become vocal about public affairs, and keeps any who speak out, including Anglicans, at a distance. Today, the church of Uganda must also vie for state attention with Pentecostal-Charismatic churches (PCC), some of which are closely linked to the regime through personal connections with the first family (see e.g. Valois 2014). PCCs are also increasingly popular among the population, the younger generations in particular, as PCCs are perceived to be better able to battle demonic spirits and poverty than their mainline competitors (Akuma 2018; Hasu 2012; Lauterbach 2017; Maxwell 1998). PCCs also attract people with their aesthetics: some of the most popular town churches combine vid-

⁴ The state announced that Luwum and two northern Ugandan members of Amin's cabinet died in a car crash, yet there are multiple eye witness accounts of the staging of the car crash and of Luwum's torture in prison (Lawoko 2005, 135–48), as well as of the state of Luwum's body, with multiple gunshot wounds and signs of severe torture, prior to its hasty burial under military supervision at his home church in Mucwini (Ward 2002, 217–19).

eo shows, loudspeakers, electric guitars, ‘cool’ pastors, and Hillsong-style praise to create a distinctly urban and ‘modern’ atmosphere (Abraham 2018; Basoga 2012; Prosén 2018). In comparison, the services provided by mainline churches appear old-fashioned. At Kitgum Town Parish, for instance, all songs are accompanied by the traditional string instrument, the *adungu*, and a simple electric keyboard. In fact, JLC, the parish choir, considers one of its core missions to be the strengthening of the Anglican musical tradition (see Alava 2022, Chapter 6).

Although war has ended in Uganda, its ‘afterlives’ (Alava 2022) resonate powerfully in the everyday lives of Acholi citizens, which are also profoundly shaped by contemporary political configurations and personal location in them. Even if *de jure* entitled to the rights of citizens, most Ugandans are *de facto* more often subject to the neglect, violence, and sporadic gifts conferred upon them and their communities by what has been defined as the neoliberal (Wiegratz, Martiniello, and Greco 2018a), clientelist (Atkinson 2018; Vokes and Wilkins 2016), and authoritarian (Branch and Yen 2018; Tapscott 2021) Ugandan state. And the Acholi, as a whole, have stood for decades at the side-lines of state power and prioritization. It is against this background of relations between the state, churches, and citizens that the events of the 2021 Janani Luwum Memorial can be interpreted.

Remembering the martyr, praising the president

In February 2015, President Yoweri Museveni announced to the large crowd gathered to celebrate Janani Luwum Day that it would henceforth be a public holiday. Among his audience in Mucwini, Kitgum, were the thirsty, tired, and annoyed members of JLC, myself included. As I describe in detail elsewhere (Alava 2022), after months of preparing for the great

event, the choir was snubbed by the organizers, pushed to the side-lines by a Kampala-based choir, humiliated by the president’s guards and forced to sing without shade under the glaring, dry-season sun. Six years later, the choir had a very different experience of Janani Luwum Day, when instead of the dignitaries travelling to Mucwini, the choir was invited to send ten COVID-19-tested members to State House to lead a commemoration televised for the national public.

The 2021 event took place only weeks after Uganda’s 2021 general elections, which were marred by state-perpetrated violence and wide-scale intimidation of the opposition (Bagala 2020; L. Taylor and Matsiko 2021; Wilkins, Vokes, and Khisa 2021). Against this background, what transpired was striking in its symbolism: instead of the bishops running to the president to request an end to the violence, as Luwum had done, or even Museveni making a pilgrimage to Janani Luwum’s grave as he had in previous years, the Church, and the Janani Luwum choir with it, made a pilgrimage of praise to the heart of state power.

The Bishop of West Lango, the Rt. Rev. Professor Alfred Olwa, opened his sermon at the 2021 event by noting there was no better place to host the memorial, as Janani Luwum himself had made a visit to the same State House shortly before his death, “boldly speaking truth to state power over several injustices and gross human rights abuses in the country at that time”. Among the numerous topics of the sermon, two things stood out: first, the bishop’s emphasis on the strides his diocese was taking to fulfil President Museveni’s vision that Uganda should develop through the hard work and investments of its citizens; second, the way in which the sermon, particularly towards its end, broke with the standard eulogizing of Janani Luwum. As the bishop described:

Janani cared for the sheep entrusted to him using the word of God. And where necessary, he walked up to confront

some of the evil. Where we can disagree with him, if he were to walk up today, as for example me [touching his hand to his heart], yes I can confront, after carefully weighing the situation, but confrontation is not always the approach.

Recall that the sermon was given barely a month after Uganda's general election. Prior to the vote, Museveni's forces had apprehended, tortured, and detained tens of opposition supporters who were on the streets protesting restrictions on citizens' freedoms. At the time of the Janani Luwum Memorial, the situation was still extremely tense, as hundreds of detainees remained missing (see e.g. Biryabarema 2021) and security forces had violently harassed journalists attempting to cover the restrictions placed on opposition leader Bobi Wine (Nyeko 2021). In the sermon, the bishop continued by pointing out ethnicity and masculinity as factors in the dispute between Luwum and Amin, and reflected on the nature of his own Langi people:

But I kept on imagining the Acholi in him [Luwum], and the Kakwa in Idi Amin... In their times, confrontation seems to be the way. You can still confront, objectively, humbly, umm, and tactfully, yes [laughs], but you will still remain a man, it is the problem, you want to remain a man, you know, [chuckles], that one first of all... Many of my Christians, the Langi are very straight, some of them are very rude. I have confronted them, but sometimes behind the scenes, and they have come to appreciate it. So, even though Janani was my bishop, if he really came today, I think we would differ in the approach.

To what was the bishop alluding here? At least two things can be teased out, beside what seems to be a suggestion that escalating tension is somehow unavoidable when men disagree with each other. First of all, the relation-

ships between the Acholi, who had been the backbone of the army of Amin's predecessor, Milton Obote, and the Kakwa, were seriously tense during Amin's era; Amin's violence hit the Acholi extremely hard, and many Acholi leaders had been critical of Luwum's attempts to stay on talking terms with the increasingly unpredictable president. Secondly, and equally noteworthy, are the historical tensions between the Langi and Acholi. The two neighbouring groups, despite their close linguistic affinity, have had their fair share of bitter political disputes, including over the division of power and resources within the church (Ward 2002, 210–11). Many northern Ugandan politicians see the divisions within the region as deliberately stoked by Museveni in order to disorganize any opposition. This background, along with the increasing competition in the religious marketplace which I described earlier, may go some way in explaining the Langi bishop's rather unflattering comments about Luwum at the 2021 event, including the words he directed at the president as he continued:

I don't know, His Excellency, how you look at us [the clergy], because sometimes we pick confronting in situations that we don't understand fully. God have mercy on us, you are our sheep, and now you see your shepherd [bishop laughs into microphone, camera shows Museveni laughing], God have mercy, you know. I think, as we remember Janani, there is this point I want to appeal to us: we must never ignore situations, but we must never be confrontational.

The bishop concluded by pleading that Christians honour Luwum's heritage by respecting God's word. Another bishop came to lead intercession, during which he prayed for "peace in our homes, peace in our villages, peace in our offices, and peace everywhere", and asked that God continue to uphold President Museveni, who has "chosen the path of peace for this country". After the closing

hymns, the television cameras were switched off and broadcasting ended but the choir members' mobile phone cameras kept flashing, and pictures were sent to the choir WhatsApp group of a radiant choir that had performed beautifully, been thanked by the first couple, and handed an envelope of appreciation, as is expected of the president at all such events. How might we interpret all this?

Twisted politics and subdued citizenship at State House

The 2021 Janani Luwum Commemoration was a perfect example of *cung i wibye* – the Acholi phrase for ‘standing on anthills’, which describes a performance of statehood and the state’s power that ensues when the space of an ecclesiastic celebration is co-opted by the state (Alava 2021; 2022), in this case, literally, as the event was moved from Luwum’s graveside in Mucwini to State House in Entebbe. In light of the conceptual apparatus I have suggested in this article, we can further ask: what kind of public, what kind of politics, and what kind of citizenship emerged at this event? An emic answer to these questions is captured in the words of someone with the username ‘Sun Light’ who commented on the YouTube video of the commemoration: “one day ugandans [sic] will gather in the same way to pray for many your country men murdered and disappearing [sic] at the hands of the current military regime” (UBC Television Uganda 2021). To provide a longer answer, I return to think with some of Hannah Arendt’s concepts.

As Ned O’Gorman (2020) – a eulogizer of the relevance of Hannah Arendt’s civic republican political thought for analyzing the present – observes, politics is often conceptualized as a game where the winner takes it all, as an extension of war, as a means of ruling over others, or as show business. From the Arendtian perspective, these models are not “authentic politics” (Arendt 2005), but broken or twisted (O’Gorman 2020) versions of it,

which can be identified in many contemporary contexts. So also in Uganda, where the specific shape of ‘twistedness’ can be described as the neopatrimonial (Rubongoya 2007), neoliberal (Wiegatz, Martiniello, and Greco 2018b), and arbitrary (Tapscott 2021) nature of state politics. For Arendt, the cure for twisted politics is the political art and practice of citizenship. Whereas the end result of twisted politics is what I have called *subdued citizenship* (Alava 2019), Arendt’s vision is of *authentic citizenship*, which “entails a whole range of practices and habits, from how we talk to one another to (...) how we agree to disagree, how we make sacrifices for one another, and how we allow ourselves to be ruled” (O’Gorman 2020, 32). When people – specifically for Arendt, strangers – engage in these practices with each other, what emerges is a public of *authentic politics* (Arendt 2005).

The national public evoked at the State House event was nothing like the public of authentic politics envisioned by Arendt but, rather, a monetized and authoritarian politics that can, from an Arendtian perspective, indeed be described as ‘twisted’ (O’Gorman 2020). The event witnessed very little of the way churches have sometimes tentatively contributed in “keeping the political space open” (Rubongoya 2007, 177), rather showing the Anglican churches’ increasing tendency to kowtow to Museveni’s power. Indeed, the sermon and the intercession prayer provided a perfect example of what Jimmy Spire Ssentongo and I (2017) have described as the Ugandan churches’ depoliticized narrative of peace, which, through its selective silencing, condones the state’s violence against the political opposition. A national public in which the practice of free speech can lead to violence or death is profoundly antithetical to authentic citizenship, and allows only citizenship that is subdued, through fear or sporadic gifts, under the power of the state. This reality is not lost on many Ugandans.

After the event, a choir member commented on the Bishop of Lango’s observa-

tions about avoiding confrontation: “When he said that, I saw him as a coward before the president.” The singer acknowledged that the bishop probably said what he did because, like everyone, he wanted something from the president, but continued: “[W]e can’t know if our president is killing people like the way the other one [Idi Amin] did. [But] sometimes when a thing is not right...you have to use your position as the bishop and sometimes, you have to confront.” While such individual criticisms were raised to me in private, the main sentiment expressed by choir members, and the sole sentiment expressed in comments about the event in the WhatsApp group, was gratitude for the president’s financial contribution toward the choir’s development. In my interpretation, this was money that the choir used to strengthen its possibility to function and grow as a tiny public, regardless of the tensions, dangers, and limitations imposed upon its members by the reality of Uganda’s political situation. It is to this tiny public, and the tiny but meaningful citizenship that it enabled that I now turn.

Singing harmony in Janani Luwum Choir

At the time I joined the JLC in early 2013, the group had just re-convened after conflict in the Diocese of Kitgum (described above) had kept them apart for years. By May of that year, about twenty people were attending rehearsals; by 2019, the number had grown to forty. In this section, I provide details of the choir as a group and describe the central values that resonated in its rhetoric and its practices.

The choir brings together a diverse group of people: the majority are aged 20-40 but there are also young students and elders; half have been married in church, while a third of the women are single parents; half have an education beyond Senior Six, and for every unemployed member, there is another who is self-employed or belongs to what Jones (2020)

defines as the local salariat. JLC is a serious commitment. Of the 34 choir members who responded to the 2019 survey, half reported attending choir activities seven or more times a week, and half between 3-6 times weekly, figures that were confirmed by the chairperson’s attendance tally. Besides daily practices and Sunday services, the choir also attends burials, weddings, and various commemorations and thanks-giving services; it visits the homes of elderly or sick parish members and holds choir retreats for prayer, fasting, and Bible study. One female member explained the motivation for giving the choir so much time:

The first time I joined the choir, what inspired me was my love for music. But as time went on, I found that more things bonded me to the choir. The lessons that they teach, they don’t give only singing, there is a lot of moral upbringing that they deal in and then service of God, that is what keeps us always coming together always like that.

At rehearsals, it was regularly emphasized that singing and serving others were ways of serving God, and that God was guiding the choir. Such sentiments were regularly expressed by my interlocutors, as in these two women’s descriptions of the choir in the questionnaire:

God, he didn’t bring us together by accident. When somebody is not there, you feel like I belong to her, and then I want to know whatever she is doing.

This choir is very beautiful. When you are away you feel like you want to fly and reach wherever they are so that you can join them, but it is only that God did not give us wings.

The Christian metaphor of family (Kyomo and Selvan 2004; Sarah et al. 2015) was often applied to the choir, and members described feeling close to each other and relying on

each other for support. The notion of family was also emphasized by a male choir member who described why members were advised to look for a partner from a different choir: “[W]e are also living as brothers and sisters and it is somehow not very good to get married with your brother or sister.” Unmarried members felt a pressure to marry and were triumphantly celebrated if they did, while some single mothers described feeling ashamed of their unmarried status (see Alava 2017b for an analysis of the same pressure for Acholi Catholics). Their experiences reflect both a commonplace disregard for and discomfort with single mothers in Uganda (Ahikire 2003, 205–7; Ogden 1996, 178), and the profoundly gendered nature of churches’ moral policing in the nation’s public (including legislative) debates (Ahikire and Mwiine 2015; Alava et. al. 2019; Boyd 2014).

Ultimately, choristers were expected, and expected themselves, to be morally exemplary, and the struggle to stay on the ‘narrow path’ was considered a collective effort. Choir leaders, sometimes the choir as a whole, could intervene to advise members on behaviour seen as ungodly. Yet this was not the norm; rather, members more commonly described how attending choir helped them, in one young man’s words, “reflect on the things that happened that are good, and the ones that are not good, and then on how we should conduct ourselves” (see Christiansen 2011; Gusman 2017 for similar accounts). In one elderly member’s assessment:

[W]hat we sing, like those hymns, are God’s word from the Bible...there is a way it gets to transform you and you become a very humble person like Christ. You start to live a Christ’s life not doing so bad thing...It changes our behaviour both at church, home, and the society where we are.

Members of this tiny public believed that their participation in choir nurtured spiritual trans-

formation: through their joint practices they became ‘like angels’, as the woman quoted in the epigraph declared. Similar things have been described in other studies of African choirs: Muntanga writes about how in Zimbabwe, young choir members emphasize getting what they defined as their “core values right, [whereby] they can be more effective agents of positive social change” (Muntanga 2018, 37), while Bjerk observes that the Lutheran youth choir he studied in Tanzania saw itself as a weapon guarding the nation from “social ills such as (...) substance abuse, crime and immorality.” (Bjerk 2005, 336). Resonantly, JLC members emphasized that personal transformation did not end at personal salvation, but radiated into the relationships choir members had with each other, and into the service of the broader community. Over half of the survey respondents mentioned the choir’s outreach activities to hospitals and elders when asked for highlights of the choir. Similarly, choir members, like Christian Acholi youth more generally (see Alava 2017a) routinely claimed that their participation in choir made them better citizens who were able to contribute to the common good.

Beside serving others, choir rhetoric stressed equality, both of which draw on biblical teachings. There were huge inequalities between choir members, yet these were deliberately under-emphasized in the way the choir spoke and acted, to a degree I have not witnessed in other church groups in Uganda, where very often, those in privileged positions are also accorded special privileges within the group. As one choir member put it, “you find that whoever manager you are, even when you are very high there above, when you come here [to choir], just sit down and learn the same songs, praise the same God, and we are all on a par.” An unemployed woman described how her initial “inferiority complex” melted away as she came to know how things were handled, while a well-earning member described one method for levelling inequalities:

We don't boast about it because the Bible tells us that when the right hand gives, the left hand is not supposed to know. So even if I come to [the choir chairperson] and say that today, I am contributing for [an unemployed choir member] to go to such and such a place, [the chairperson] will just tell [that member] that they are covered.

Not everyone was willing to accede to this egalitarian ethos, and subsequently left. As one man explained:

There are certain people who come in and if they feel our class is not very good, they go away. They think the chairperson is supposed to be cross-legged and commanding others; go and do this, go and do this, go and do this. And yet, she is the one we are going to send for firewood when we are having a retreat...If there is no water in the compound where we are, she will go and fetch the water, and the rest of us can put ourselves into the kitchen, you go and you prepare something for your friends to eat.

The deliberate emphasis on equality is one of the most striking differences between the choir's tiny public and Uganda's national public, where the division between rich and poor is growing, and people are routinely reprimanded for not overcoming their poverty (Alava 2019). It was also a significant aspect of the choir's particular methods for maintaining what I would, following Holly Porter (2016), define as social harmony. Harmony, in the JLC, was maintained by minimizing internal conflict, a process which can in some instances be violent in its silencing, and by steering clear of both party and church politics. Any conflicts were settled as quickly as possible, sometimes through recourse to the notion that a God-fearing, praying, and Bible-reading community should be above argument or envy. Because of my research, I knew the

political stands of many individual members, and knew they discussed politics with select friends and family members, but never in the choir. In group interviews, members spoke of how important it was for the choir to be 'unbiased'; when I asked whether there had ever been disagreement about, for instance, performing at politicians' events, the suggestion was resolutely denied. One member explained that the choir was never invited to rallies as such, but if politicians invited them to sing at other kinds of gatherings, "we don't look at the political thing. We go there knowing that our presence might change them, then we go and sing there."

Besides party politics, the choir also strove to maintain considerable distance from the 'confusion' (Alava 2022) of church politics which had, during the diocesan conflict, torn the choir itself apart. As the choir chairperson explained:

When there is a problem in the church... we vowed never to what? To make it separate us as choir members....And so we have never involved ourselves in things of the church so much, we always come, concentrate on our singing, and we depart. Whatever comes that is hard, we pray over [it] and we leave.

Overall, from the account I provide above, and from my long-term engagement with the JLC, I argue that the choir's core aims were the maintenance of a kind of 'godly harmony' through commitment to equality, Christian morals, and care for one's fellow human beings.

Does love destroy politics or nurture tiny citizenship?

In order to think about what was going on at the choir in more abstract turns, I turn now first to Gary Alan Fine's analysis of small groups as tiny publics. Thereafter, I circle back to

Arendt, and bring an Arendtian perspective into discussion with what I claim can be defined as tiny citizenship at the Janani Luwum Choir. The specific question that demands attention is that of Christian love, which I claim is at the heart of JLC's citizenship practice but which sits uncomfortably with Arendtian views of citizenship. As I will show, pausing to unpack why and how is particularly important when applying Arendtian thoughts to analyse an African choir.

Gary Alan Fine advocates paying close attention to small groups – whether brought together by religious identity or shared leisure activity – as constituent elements of politics and the broader public, as the ‘hinge’ between the micro level of the individual and the macro level of social structure.⁵ As Fine remarks, “we do not live with millions, but with a few, and these few shape our worldview” (2021, 7). Fine’s ‘meso-level’ approach seeks to explain the role of small groups in the creation of broader publics, in processes of government control, and as an engine of (or break with) explicitly political civic engagement. To do so, he insists, “we must reach beyond a narrowly defined political analysis, acknowledging that individuals are committed to their emplacement in community. They do this through the recognition of the salience of social relations and through the emotional linkages that flow from these relations” (Fine 2019, 18–19).

Where these linkages most typically form is in groups, which “may be small, [yet] contribute to a broader politics, embracing values on which shared commitment depends” (Fine 2021, 14). What this approach means is not that we should simply assess whether small groups engage in explicitly political processes, or encourage their members to do so; rather, Fine’s view suggests that to under-

stand how individuals and larger polities, such as the state, come together, we must look to the middle: to places where a multitude of ‘I’s become a ‘we’, and how. In Fine’s words, “we must bracket ‘big structures’ to discover the centrality of interaction. Polities, communities and institutions depend on interpersonal communication. (...) Even ostensibly apolitical groups, such as leisure clubs (...) potentially link their commitments into political culture” (2019, 7). The JLC’s visit to State House is a uniquely evocative and concrete illustration of what that kind of link can look like.

The argument that emerges at the intersection of Arendt’s and Fine’s approaches, one closely resonating with pragmatist-inspired citizenship theorizing (see e.g. Holma and Kontinen 2019b), is that the essence of Arendtian authentic politics – the “art of getting along and getting things done together” (O’Gorman 2020, 32) – is learned first and foremost *not* with strangers but in tiny publics in which people create shared ideologies through joint practice, thus cultivating networks of care and trust. In these authors’ terms, extended for this article’s purposes: authentic citizenship can only grow from tiny citizenship.

Using Fine’s concepts, the choir’s practices and rhetoric created a distinct tiny public with its own distinct ideological field, one characterized by an emphasis on harmony, equality, service, and care. The choir members’ emotionally intense experience of singing together and praising God, and their affectionate way of talking about each other as sisters and brothers and family, reflected how “ideology expresses the transformation of shared feelings (...) into beliefs about the good self and the ethical social system” (Fine 2012, 99). The choir’s ideals were put into action (Fine 2012, 103) through visits to sick members’ homes, and by establishing methods to accommodate choir members’ different income levels. The ideal of egalitarianism was also conveyed in the daily choir practices’ closing ritual, which I described at the beginning of this article.

⁵ Fine’s approach draws particularly from Ervin Goffman’s (1983) classic notion of interaction orders and from John Dewey’s (2012) concept of local publics. For an extended reflection on applying Dewey to the study of citizenship in Africa, see Holma and Kontinen (2019b).

After first singing together – an experience that can be elating and create a sense of closeness – members shared their troubles, prayed for each other, and joined hands in a circle of blessing. To borrow Fine’s description of another small group’s ritual: “[t]his ritual enacted the sociopolitical beliefs held by [the group]. The organization of the meeting connected to the community’s ideology” (Fine 2012, 104).

We might compare the JLC’s closing ritual at the end of its daily rehearsals with the state-making ritual witnessed at the Janani Luwum Memorial. As I described above, I claim that at the State House event, which commemorated a religiously motivated citizenship activist, contemporary bishops disowned Luwum’s heritage while pledging fealty to a dictator. The event was an enactment of the contemporary Anglican Church’s subservience to President Museveni, and to a state that curtails the space of freedom that authentic citizenship requires. In this performance, the choir had no choice but to sing, thereby performing the role of subdued citizenship. What is notable here is that the ideals nurtured in the choir’s daily practices – commitment, service to others, moral uprightness, harmony maintenance, and avoidance of politics – resonated with the citizenship ideals of the NRM regime. These practices did not inspire members to follow Janani Luwum’s path of activist citizenship, which today is upheld by only a small radical minority of Ugandan Anglicans (see Niringiye 2017). Rather, the Bishop of Lango’s cautioning against confrontation sat comfortably with the choir’s internal ideology of maintaining harmony. That said, I do suggest that as a tiny public characterized by care, harmony, equality, and love, by virtue of its very existence the JLC enacted a challenge to the violence and exclusion underpinning the contemporary Ugandan national public. It provided a safe haven from what was a potentially dangerous political realm, and nurtured a way of living with others that perhaps contains seeds for a less dangerous future. Such a proposition clashes in important ways with Arendtian citizenship

notions, which I employed in my assessment of the 2021 Janani Luwum commemoration, and it is to this clash that I now turn.

For Arendt, what lies at the heart of citizenship is the friendship between free citizens, which “is capable of mediating the private to the public realm” (Chiba 1995, 520-21). Notably, however, friendship in this view is distinct from both intimate and neighbourly love, as love, for Arendt, is “not only apolitical but antipolitical” (Arendt 1958, 242). Sentimental love ties people too closely together, pre-empts recognition of the other’s difference and equality and thereby destroys plurality and the space between persons that authentic politics requires (Caver 2019). In Arendt’s (1958) view, a strict division was needed between the private sphere, to which social issues belonged, and the public sphere of authentic politics. As many scholars (Burroughs 2015; Caver 2019; Gines 2014; Vivian 2021) have argued, Arendt’s insistence was blind to the way in which it is precisely *social* inequalities that structure different peoples’ access to the public. Crucially, this blind spot was not just an outgrowth of Arendt’s theoretical notions, but of her racist attitudes (Burroughs 2015; Gines 2007; Owens 2017) – as has been typical of much Western philosophy (Mills 1997).

As detailed by Butorac (2018), Arendt’s racism comes out clearly in her response ([1962] 2006) to the influential text of black American civil rights activist, James Baldwin (1962), on the ties of love that sustain persecuted Black American communities amid the lovelessness of White America. In Butorac’s (2018) summary, love, which in Baldwin’s account includes both its neighbourly and intimate forms, is “a technique of survival that enables black people to guard against the self-destructive tendencies of hatred” (Baldwin 1962, 716), “a mode of self-affirmation and an act of resistance” (Baldwin 1962, 716), and “a way of being and acting in the world that challenges us to exceed ourselves and demand that others do the same” (Baldwin 1962, 717). In her response, Arendt ([1962] 2006) condemns

such talk of love as dangerous, and declares that Baldwin's peoples' "beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth, and their humanity" are characteristics born of suffering, and have no place in the realm of politics. Instead of loving a particular issue or a particular group of people, one should, in her view, love the shared world of authentic politics (Caver 2019).

It is noteworthy that Arendt – and Baldwin⁶ – were both deeply and specifically critical of the political potential of *Christian* love. For Arendt, Christian love for the neighbour was akin to pity and pre-empted equality. Moreover, the 'otherworldliness' of a love inspired by a transcendent God was, in Arendt's reckoning, particularly destructive of authentic politics. Arendt's antipathy may have grown from her disregard of some of the central tenets of Christian *agape* love, such as its self-sacrificial commitment to service, which by definition extends to strangers and enemies (Chiba 1995, 529) – something that certainly corresponds with the teachings I have heard while sitting in the pews of Janani Luwum Choir. Moreover, while JLC members saw love as being inspired by God, this love was, in Chiba's terms, "directed toward, and revealed within, the (...) secular realm of life itself" (Chiba 1995, 532).

What relevance do such reflections have for an analysis of citizenship? Whereas Arendt insists, on normative grounds, that the public sphere be evacuated of the 'sentimentality' of love, a focus on tiny citizenship as advocated in this article calls empirical attention to the ways in which love – whether *agape* love (Chiba 1995), neighbourly or intimate love (Baldwin 1962), or the affectionate ties of friends (Fine 2021, Chapter 2) – can inspire and shape the ways people engage with, or find ways to exist even when they are forced to withdraw from the broader politi-

cal arena. To make these claims on the basis of an Anglican choir means taking seriously the experiences and interpretations of my research interlocutors. It also means pushing back against Arendt's view that religion could never provide the ground for authentic politics, and that secularism has made religion altogether irrelevant (Chiba 1995, 526 n. 55). This resonates, of course, with what has been said in the literature about religion and politics in Africa, a literature to which I hope to have introduced new food for thought in the reflections offered here.

Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed citizenship and the JLC through two different lenses. The first drew from Hannah Arendt's writings to consider what citizenship could *ideally* look like as a practice that constitutes the public, suggesting the notion of authentic citizenship as a companion to Arendt's envisioned authentic politics. Analysing the narrow role of subdued citizenship prescribed to the choir upon their encounter with the Ugandan state at the national commemoration of Janani Luwum, I argued that the monetized and authoritarian nature of the Ugandan state, its twisted politics, leaves little space for citizens to engage in Arendtian authentic citizenship. The second lens drew from Gary Alan Fine's theory of small groups to consider what actually takes place in the tiny publics that emerge from interaction in small groups such as the JLC. Analysing the ideological field of the choir, and the practices and rhetoric that maintain it, I suggested that tiny citizenship, although small in scale, can be great in significance.

For Hannah Arendt, citizenship is not just a status but also a practice that is both grounded in and productive of freedom, equality, judgement, and action. In Arendt's vision, the public is a space that citizens enter freely as equals, and in which, through the interaction of strangers, genuine politics emerges.

⁶ In 'Letter from a region in my mind', Baldwin (1962) tears through his experience as a church youth preacher slowly coming to terms with his homosexuality, describing the condemnation and lovelessness that eventually led him to abandon religious practice altogether.

The public is distinct from the social and the private spheres, both of which are not only subsidiary to the public, but potentially destructive of it. So is love. For Arendt, both intimate and neighbourly forms of love are anti-political for they destroy the space between the self and the other, either through sentimental attachment or by diminishing the other into an object of pity and benevolence. In Arendt's vision, other-worldly religion, and Christian love in particular, are thus a threat to politics; they cannot be thought of as grounds for public citizenship. At best, they are the recourse of downtrodden groups, and cannot but wither in the presence of a secular public and authentic politics.

Gary Alan Fine's theory of tiny publics shares certain elements of Arendt's civic republicanism. Yet, where Arendt's political thought provides a 'yard-stick' of ideals against which reality can be measured, Fine's work provides the means for considering citizenship empirically, as practice. For Fine, groups that organize around collective interests – whether these are explicit political agendas, religious beliefs, or leisure activities – foundationally shape a political order (Fine 2019, 12). Small groups, or tiny publics, are the hinge between the micro and the macro level, the mediator between individual lives and the broad sphere of politics. Although the classic notion of citizenship suggests an individual's relation to the state, Fine's work underscores how individuals in fact typically do *not* engage with a broader public as individuals, but through groups. The same is also true in Uganda. What Fine describes as the meso level of small groups – churches (Bompani 2008; Gusman 2017), saving groups (Ahimbisibwe and Kontinen 2021; Ndidde, Ahimbisibwe, and Kontinen 2020), burial societies (Jones 2009), chieftaincy structures (Komujuni 2019), *bodaboda* unions (Lagace 2018), crime prevention networks (Tapscott 2017) – is vital for understanding the dynamics of the national public, how politics works, and how societal change either takes place or does not.

Focus on such groups should not, however, mean ignoring the broader political structures in which small groups are embedded – notably, the state. As critics have pointed out, civic republicanism (of which Arendt is a key figure, and which appears to linger behind Fine's work) idealizes communities, and is predicated on a romanticized idea of a time when democratic processes could theoretically take place within a town council; yet, living as we do in a world of nation states, the affairs of states must somehow be handled (Gey 1993). In states like Uganda, this task is massively complicated by the unresolved tensions inherited from the colonial state architecture, problems exacerbated through waves of post-colonial violence and the complex intertwinings of politicized ethnicity and national inequality with structures of global capitalism. These twisted structures remain the violent restraints against which political community must be imagined (Katongole 2011), and in light of which the nation's affairs must somehow be organized.

Fine claims that social change happens as the consequence of changes within small groups, but this can be questioned (Blunden 2013); however powerful the tiny publics or their conglomerates that emerge from small groups like church choirs, they alone cannot address the problems of nation-building and statecraft. Yet small groups do achieve some remarkable things. In the case discussed in this article, the choir succeeded – despite the tensions and sometimes deeply exclusionary moral and class hierarchies within it – to nurture bonds of love, care, and trust that enriched the lives of its members and that, in my observations, appeared to radiate out from the choir to the church encircling it. Against the backdrop of violence that northern Uganda has experienced, and the church's decade-long internal conflict, this is no meagre thing. As Fine puts it, the "predictability [created by tiny publics] is not to be taken lightly; our lives depend on it" (2012, 15).

In sum, my analysis suggests the utility

of combining analyses of seemingly apolitical tiny publics with more state-centric discussion. Recent scholarship has described the increasingly neoliberal (Wiegratz, Martiniello, and Greco 2018a), clientelist (Atkinson 2018; Vokes and Wilkins 2016), and authoritarian (Branch and Yen 2018; Tapscott 2021) nature of the Ugandan state. Less attention has been paid to what it is that citizens actually *do* as a consequence of this reality. In a recent analysis, Jimmy Spire Ssentongo and I (in review)

observed Ugandan citizens' moods in the 'late Museveni era' to be largely despondent and even cynical – only rarely hopeful, and at best content. Yet what I have foregrounded in this article is that when people keep away from politics because of their belief that the president 'may even kill you', they do not simply retreat into passive solitude. Rather, they take care of their families, they go to church, and they may join a choir which makes them 'to be like angels'.

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