PREFACE

Acclaimed by policy makers, development workers, diplomats and many academics, Uganda has been presented as a country transformed. From the nadir of Amin and the 1970s Uganda has risen to earn a reputation as one of the continent's few success stories. It has been presented as a country ahead of the curve in promoting the signature themes of development policy and programming on the continent, and was the first country in Africa both to take the HIV/AIDS pandemic seriously and to record significant declines in infection rates. In the 1989 parliamentary elections Uganda reserved a number of seats for women, making it one of the first countries anywhere to promote political equality through positive discrimination. It was also in the first wave of countries to decentralise government powers away from the centre to the regions in the early 1990s. In 1997 Uganda introduced universal primary education at a time when this was very far from being the standard policy prescription for poorer countries.

This transformation of Uganda is associated, above all, with President Yoweri Museveni, head of the National Resistance Movement. Exiled under Amin, and a failed presidential candidate in the elections of 1979, Museveni has served as Uganda's President since 1986. He is credited with bringing a new type of politics to Uganda, a politics that is less about ethnic conflict, religious division or regional opposition, and more about economic and social development. His time in office is celebrated for having brought a level of peace and prosperity to southern and western parts of the country. Uganda is now seen as a country transformed largely due the achievement of Yoweri Museveni and his government.

This book started out as one more attempt to chronicle an aspect of Uganda's transformation. Back in October 2001 I was a PhD student who wanted to look at the impact of government reforms on the lives of ordinary Ugandans. In particular I wanted to look at the impact of the government's decentralisation and democratisation reforms on the countryside. My concern was to see to what extent, a decade on from their inception, these reforms had changed the way people related to the state.

I chose to do my research in the Teso region in the east of the country, one of the poorer parts of Uganda. After arriving in the trading centre of

Ngora, I settled on the village of Oledai as the place where I would collect information and spend time. Oledai was selected as a field site because I wanted to do my research in a place that seemed typical for the area. Oledai was not a 'project village', nor was it one of those few communities where development agencies had focused their efforts and invested considerable resources. Neither was Oledai especially remote, as it is located near to Ngora, the county headquarters for that western side of Kumi District. I wanted to say something about the impact of government reforms in an ordinary Ugandan village and Oledai seemed to fit the bill. That was the theory, at least.

In practice, things did not turn out as planned. Early on during my stay it became clear that government reforms mattered little to the people living in Oledai. The village council did not meet; there were no public gatherings where people voiced their concerns in relation to government programmes. Policies on health, agriculture or education did not seem to reach much beyond the district headquarters in Kumi. The parish chief only visited Oledai twice during the eighteen months I stayed (even though he was responsible for a total of only two villages). Taxes were not collected in any serious sense (local taxes made up less than two per cent of district expenditure), while villagers contributed more to churches or to burial societies than they did to the government. The idea that there was such as thing as 'the state' which was responsible for transforming Ugandan society did not seem the best way of approaching what was going on in Oledai.

In the first few weeks of fieldwork I thought about moving to the district capital, Kumi. I knew that moving there would put me in a place where I could say something about the Ugandan state. Kumi, the district capital, was the recipient of government funds and played host to a number of development organisations and programmes, and using the district capital as a base is the usual path for social scientists who want to research rural development in Uganda. In the end, I decided to continue in Oledai and from there try to work out what was going on.

The more I stayed in Oledai, the more puzzled I became by the relationship between the village and the state. What I sensed, though I found it difficult to explain, was the feeling that the Ugandan government had withdrawn. What had once been the engine of rural transformation, at least in the earlier part of the twentieth century, had become an absence. This was paradoxical as the government's decentralisation and democratisation reforms were meant, on paper at least, to bring the state closer to the lives of the people.

Beyond the State puts forward an explanation as to why the government mattered so little. I argue that places like Oledai fall 'in between'. They are situated away from those islands of development where state activities, donor projects and international capital are concentrated in Africa. They

are situated away from the places where most research on 'development' gets done. Outside of Kampala, the district capitals or a few isolated 'project communities', there is a much more general landscape of villages and communities that are marginal. The state has little interest in these places; they are under-administered and have little influence. Part of the book explains why Oledai fell 'in between', what this tells us about the actual nature of Uganda's transformation under Museveni, and what we thus learn about the way the study of development has been approached in Africa.

This book is also about those changes that mattered in Oledai. A large part of the text is taken up with a study not of the absence of the state, but of the presence of religious and customary institutions. It is through these organisational forms – churches, burial societies – that people managed their affairs. These institutions derived their legitimacy from the history of the region and from their ability to deal with people's concerns. They provided the space where disputes were managed and where people had rebuilt the virtues of politeness, deference and sociality in the aftermath of a brutal and dehumanising civil war. Religious and customary institutions which have been marginalised in the literature on development in Africa are central to the story of what had changed.

In providing a picture of life beyond the state this book contributes, I hope, towards a different way of seeing development in Africa. In pointing to the withdrawn nature of the state, and presenting a picture of what matters in Oledai this book is about how places develop in the absence of 'development'.

London, 2008

To the memory of my father