
Based on fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2019, this book is a welcome addition to and extension of the anthropology of northern Uganda and that of Christianity. At the center of Alava’s work are two parishes, one Roman Catholic and one Church of Uganda (Anglican) in the town of Kitgum. Alava situates the activity of the people in the parishes in their political contexts, both local and national. As a result, she shows what she analytically argues to be the case – that far from being set off from the rest of society, religious actors and institutions are deeply embedded, and therefore implicated, in politics.

Alava draws from the Acholi word *anyobayoba*, translated into English as ‘confusion’, to interpret this social embeddedness of religion. Helpfully, she utilizes her own native Finnish language and its word *hännennys*, meaning both ‘to stir a pot’ or ‘to confuse’ on the one hand and ‘to be confused’ on the other, to bring out the fuller Acholi meaning of *anyobayoba* (10). Religious actors both actively stir the pot of politics and are stirred by it. Each successive chapter shows how this is the case.

Following the overview offered in the introduction, the first chapter shows how Christianity has been embedded in northern Uganda from its colonial beginnings in ways that still impact churches today. Although the Catholic Verona (later termed ‘Comboni’ after their founder) missionaries had greater numbers and financial resources than their Anglican counterparts, the latter had the political backing of the British Empire. As a result, there was contestation between the two denominations from the start. Both aligned against Acholi religious practice and clan membership at the time, urging and sometimes forcing people to move from their villages to near the mission stations.

Alava makes the interesting observation that current members of the two Kitgum parishes in question do not think of their churches as ‘foreign impositions’ (33). In supporting this observation, she offers an important interpretation of recent Catholic efforts to have two slain indigenous catechists recognized as saints. Daudi Okello and Jildo Irwa were two early Acholi converts to Catholicism who were killed by locals in 1918. The ecclesial and broad local view is that they were killed for their religious beliefs. Alava provides evidence that the killings were part of a larger uprising against colonial imposition, indicating that they were killed less for their beliefs per se than for what those beliefs represented in terms of their embeddedness from the start in a brutally oppressive system. Nonetheless, as Alava shows, contemporary Acholi Catholics do not interpret Okello and Irwa’s deaths this way. In the classical
sense, the men are martyrs for the faith. Regional believers gather every year for a feast day, that in practice lasts three days, to commemorate them.

The second chapter demonstrates the durability of the Catholic-Anglican competition by surveying the development of the two denominations from the early years of independence up to the near present. The deep political embeddedness of the faiths was such that each identified with a particular political party, with the Catholics aligned with the Democratic Party (DP) and the Church of Uganda members joining with the Uganda People’s Congress (UPC). Alava shows how even while the rise of President Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Movement relativizes both the DP and the UPC, the Catholic-Anglican contestation continues today among the older generations. In one of the prime contributions of this chapter, Alava demonstrates that the formation of ecumenical peace advocacy through the Acholi Religious Peace Leaders Initiative (ARLP), while important, arose only late in the conflict between the Ugandan government and the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).

The third chapter on the relative silence of Alava’s interlocutors on their experience of the conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government carries important implications for anthropology generally. Here Alava makes the case that such silence is not simply a sign of trauma but is also an indication that people are already constructing new lives. She writes eloquently, ‘I have grown to believe that silence is polyphonic: it consists of multiple, at times discordant and contradictory sounds, and cannot be consigned to single-cause explanations such as “trauma” or “recovery”.’ (95) It is worth reading the book for this chapter alone. It shows that Alava practices the patience that silence requires.

The fourth and fifth chapters draw on another Acholi phrase, cung i wibye (to stand atop an anthill), to interpret the neopatrimonialism of Ugandan politics and religion’s place within it. The anthills referred to are termite mounds that can be five feet tall or more, a traditional standing spot for powerholders giving speeches. Alava uses two church events – a funeral and a remembrance – to dramatize a shift wherein, under Museveni’s rule, the social space for speaking back to the man on the anthill is shrinking, leading to a different kind of silence in northern Uganda. People are afraid to critique the government for fear of reprisal. In the 2012 funeral there was much give and take when political leaders spoke, even though Museveni had the last word. In the 2015 remembrance of Janani Luwum, an Anglican Archbishop killed by Idi Amin’s men, representatives of the NRM were the only political leaders allowed to speak. In both cases politicians used religious occasions and institutions as anthills from which to speak.
In chapters 6 and 7 Alava shows how church leaders at once articulate a vision of peace among all Ugandans and foment division – confusion – among people. Such seeming contradiction is not the result first of all of cynicism, but part of what it means to be embedded in human reality. A significant point that Alava makes, and one that is worth developing further, is the relative silence of church leaders – mostly men, mostly older – on questions of gender-based violence. The book’s conclusion underscores the realities of embeddedness and confusion.

This is a book of patient ethnography. Alava has a gift for holding herself back just enough while paying attention, allowing the research participants the time and space to unfold themselves. The book is part of a new series from Bloomsbury, ‘New Directions in the Anthropology of Christianity’. Given the series editors – Naomi Haynes, Jon Bialecki, Hillary Kaell, and James Bielo – we can look forward to more of the kind of insightful inquiry found in the present book.

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