Catholic Action and Ugandan Radicalism: Political Activism in Buganda, 1930-1950

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Abstract
In late colonial Uganda, Catholic individuals, communities, institutions and ideals shaped the rise of a popular politics that rejected the colonial alliance between Britain and Baganda oligarchs and called for change. Catholics valued and worked effectively with hierarchies, used elaborate catechisms and questioning in their calls for action, and deployed networks of activist cells and intelligence gathering as they sought community solidarity around their central goals. These methods provided a template for action for the more directly political initiatives of Catholics and lapsed Catholics of the late 1940s in the Bataka Union and the mobilized cotton communities of Masaka and Kampala. The Catholic antecedents of 1940s and 1950s activism help explain elements of activists’ initiatives that fail to fit more conventional analytic structures assessing politics through the lenses of class or nationalism.

Keywords
Uganda, Catholic, politics, nationalism, Buganda

Christianity in Buganda, the central kingdom of the British protectorate of Uganda, was part of a markedly successful alliance between the Ganda oligarchy and British colonizers. It was more than simply a colonial wedge or opiate for African masses. Baganda and other Ugandans made Christianity their own and developed critical analyses and social mobilization tactics for politics drawing on the analyses and mobilization they learned in church. Father Waliggo’s research in Buddu has shown how Uganda’s early Catholic Church was built by activists to fit indigenous ideas of power and social organization, rather than dictated by an external agenda of colonial power or evangelization. And the Protestant Native Anglican Church, later the Church of Uganda, has historically been a central part of the country’s political, social and economic life. Here, though, I look again at the interactions of the Catholic Church and the Ugandan people to see how the ideas, values and institutions of the Catholic Church shaped the activists and activism of the 1940s.
In late colonial Uganda, in ways dramatically counter to the intentions of its mission sponsors and to the popular image in Buganda of Catholics as placid peasants, Catholics and lapsed Catholics drew on what they had learned in the Catholic Church as they imagined and organized a radical politics in opposition to the power of oligarchs and the British. Catholicism and Catholics, like the Protestant church, did indeed often serve both colonial and indigenous structures of power. But Catholic ideas, values and organizational tactics could also support activists who challenged colonial orthodoxies. These ideas, values and organizational methods may explain far more about local politics of that era than conventional analyses based on ideas of nationalism.

By the 1940s, Ugandan Christians had transformed Protestant Christianity in Buganda from a small, mission-based faith to a central reality of Uganda’s politics. Bishops crowned kings. Appointments to offices were allocated partly by religious association. The Native Anglican Church continued to be headed by British bishops, but it provided Ugandans with opportunities for service and power.

Historians writing about religion and politics in Buganda have focused on Protestants because the Church of Uganda, both in its religious leadership and its laity, were closely associated with the British Protectorate’s power, exemplified in the fate of Martin Luther Nsibirwa, Buganda’s prime minister, who was assassinated on the steps of the Anglican Namirembe Cathedral in 1945 after pushing Buganda to accept the forced sale of land for protectorate development programs. To understand the breakdown of the oligarchy’s domination during the late colonial era, though, it is important to look beyond officials and allies of Britain and examine the opposition, radical political activists. These were a mixed group in which not simply lapsed Protestants but Catholics were visible, and strongly Catholic regions key to political protests. A close examination of Catholic institutions, such as the Old Boys’ Association of St. Mary’s College Kisubi, the Catholic Teachers’ Association and the official Catholic Action organization founded in the 1930s, provides hints of how Buganda’s Catholics developed and mobilized political and politicized sociability. The standard image of Buganda’s Catholics has been of second-class citizens, often peasants, who worked hard, understood obedience and were more disciplined subordinates than the Protestants who jostled, networked and maneuvered within British administration, seeking to adapt it for their own ends. Catholicism and politics intersected during conventional historiographies only during the civil war of the nineteenth century, which Protestants won with the backing of their British allies, and in the rise of the Democratic Party amid the new nationalisms of the 1950s. Catholics, though, were not especially apolitical during the intervening decades of exclusion from the