

BOOK REVIEW

Catholicism, Politics, and Nationalism in Postcolonial Uganda

Contesting Catholics: Benedicto Kiwanuka and the Birth of Postcolonial Uganda

By Jonathon L. Earle and J. J. Carney. London: James Currey, 2021.
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Contesting Catholics is a history of Uganda's politico-religious and ethnic competition, and alliances told through the life of Benedicto Kiwanuka. Kiwanuka was Uganda's first prime minister and president of the Democratic Party (DP), and at the time of his death in 1972, Uganda's Chief Justice. Historians of Uganda have asserted that DP was founded as a front for Uganda's Catholic Church, tasked to oppose the marginalization of Catholics in politics, a trend that has roots in the late nineteenth-century religious wars in Buganda.¹ The Anglicans (Protestants) with Capt. Lugard's support emerged victorious and established their dominance over key political positions in Buganda, an arrangement that was later extended to Uganda. This scholarship argues that the late nineteenth-century religio-political wars in Buganda ushered religion into the country's politics, manifested in religious sectarianism, a situation that has barely changed. *Contesting Catholics* is a new entrant into this debate with the authors inviting us to think about how Uganda's Catholics acted outside the Catholic Church to "conceive the nation" (2). In six chapters, Jonathon Earle and Jay Carney present a new interpretation of the history of Uganda in the late colonial period and early postindependence period.

So, is it possible for the reader to understand the actions of Uganda's Catholics led by Kiwanuka, as aimed at nation-building, rather than a continuation of their historical protest against political marginalization? In their book, Earle and Carney affirm that Kiwanuka led a spirited attempt to fashion a coherent Ugandan nationalism despite a strong wave of ethnic and sectarian politics and sporadic violence in some regions. This was no easy task. Whereas Kiwanuka presented himself as a Catholic nationalist, his adversaries and some of his admirers saw him as a Muganda first and as a Catholic second. In opposing Kiwanuka, the Kingdom of Toro saw him as a subject of Buganda (Chapter Two), and in Teso, Kiwanuka's prime ministership was interpreted as a continuation of the

¹See: S. R. Karugire, *The Roots of Instability in Uganda* (Kampala: New Vision, 1988); Tarsis B. Kabwegyere, *The Politics of State Formation and Destruction in Uganda* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1995); Dan M. Mudoola, *Religion, Ethnicity and Politics in Uganda*, 2nd ed. (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1996); Samwiri Lwanga-Lunyiigo, *A History of the Democratic Party of Uganda. The First Thirty Years (1954-1984)* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2015).

political authority of earlier Baganda colonial chiefs in the area.² Therefore, despite their enthusiasm about Kiwanuka's attempt to forge a national front, the allegiance of his admirers was undermined by local sectarian issues rooted in their identities as Banyankore, Bakonjo, or Itesot. In Teso, we learn from this book that its people welcomed Catholicism because they interpreted its political objectives in ways that reverberated with older ideas about egalitarianism in the region.

Similarly, the book avers that although Kiwanuka was a Muganda, he very self-consciously presented himself as someone acting in the interests of Uganda, not his sectarian community. Historians of Uganda will welcome such a nuanced account that disrupts the existing narratives of religion and politics in Uganda, in which ethnicity and religious sectarianism were the only arenas for composing Ugandan nationalism in the late colonial period.

The attention the authors give to political parties in Uganda's postindependence history is another of the book's merits. Because of its focus on Kiwanuka, *Contesting Catholics* is a story told from a DP point of view, decentering the Uganda People's Congress (UPC). Scholars of the political history of Uganda tend to place the DP at the margins of national politics.³ But Earle and Carney's focus on the DP shows how it suffered internal rifts and faced opposition from Catholics, and others who neither identified as Anglican nor UPC. In Buganda (Kiwanuka's home region), the authors use the case of Aloysius Darlington Lubowa (Chapter Five) to illuminate how other Catholics — and also supporters of DP — towed a line different from Kiwanuka's, by avidly supporting the Buganda monarchy. These "contesting Catholics" distort the traditional narrative in which the DP is a staunchly republican party and the political face of the Catholic Church and offers an alternative narrative that does not reduce the history of Uganda's political parties to tensions between UPC and DP. The authors' story is anything but straightforward.

This book illuminates one of the enduring challenges to Uganda's nation-building, which bedeviled Kiwanuka's attempts at forging Uganda's nationalism. To his opponents, Kiwanuka represented Buganda, yet Buganda was (and still is) considered a stumbling block to national unity mainly because of its demand for a special status under a federal form of government, which has always been interpreted as a pretext for attempts to secede from Uganda.⁴ Earle and Carney use Chapter Four, to focus on the activism of Okot p'Bitek, the celebrated poet and Acholi intellectual who argued that Buganda's power needed to be curbed as a prerequisite for a unified Uganda.

The focus on Okot p'Bitek, who was not a practicing Catholic, allows the authors to score yet another point with this book. The authors' analysis of the political mobilization work of Okot p'Bitek and his fellow Acholi, Daudi Ochieng allows the book to question the "traditional" schism in Uganda's political economy in which northern Uganda is presented as no more than a producer of men for the military and labor for industries located in the southern part of the country.⁵ The authors convincingly show that northern Uganda, including Acholi, produced intellectuals, political mobilizers, and leaders, who intervened in key political debates. For instance, in 1961, Acholiland delivered a DP victory in the local elections, and played a crucial role in ensuring that Kiwanuka kept his DP leadership, against a spirited push from Ankole (and other southern-based dissidents). In contrast to the existing literature, Carney and Earle show that the Acholi were kingmakers, not just the king's guards.

Contesting Catholics falls within the burgeoning body of revisionist literature in Uganda's historiography. This is possible because of the book's unique sources. The authors draw mainly from Kiwanuka's private papers, which give them a unique vantage point for a fresh look at Uganda's political history.

²In colonizing Uganda, the British used Buganda as their base and Baganda (the people of Buganda) as their agents. Ugandans opposed the Baganda chiefs, and it is this legacy of anger against Baganda (and Buganda) that the authors point out as one of the challenges to Kiwanuka's political mobilization work.

³On Obote and UPC, see, A. G. G. Ginyera-Pincha, *Apolo Milton Obote and His Times* (New York: Nok, 1978).

⁴See Phares Mutibwa, *The Buganda Factor in Uganda Politics* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2008).

⁵For a discussion of what has been termed "the north-south divide" see: Kumar Rupesinghe, ed., *Conflict Resolution in Uganda* (London: James Currey, 1989); Reid Richard, *A History of Modern Uganda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

In so doing, this book puts the DP right at the center of attempts to shape national unity in Uganda, underlining Catholicism, as Kiwanuka's ideological guide. In March 1961, Benedicto Kiwanuka won Uganda's first election for self-governance, becoming the first Chief Minister. While Catholicism offered him opportunities to gain traction in a political field mired by allegiance to local and ethnic issues, it would be a stretch of the explanation if we narrow his win to the electorate's acceptance of his message of truth and justice rooted in Catholicism. Nevertheless, the authors' focus on Catholicism provides them a way of telling Kiwanuka's story as a Catholic politician, not a political representative of the Catholic Church in Uganda.