



African Agency in Mission

Apolo Kivebulaya and Religious Change in East Africa

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

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This book provides a history of religious change in East Africa through the lens of the life of **Apolo Kivebulaya** (c. 1865 – 1933). The book closely examines a previously less visible and poorly documented history, arguing that Kivebulaya and other African Christians contributed to the production and spread of spiritual knowledge, practices, and relationships. Given the fact that most of the existing documentation was written by European missionaries, the biography ensures that Africans remain at the center as the primary agents of Christian witness. The biography demonstrates excellent engagement of sources, including archival material and sources only available in East Africa.

The first chapter focuses on the news of Apolo's death and the various ways in which the Christian community at home and abroad received the news and memorialized him. Canon Apolo was remembered in stories of his life published by European missionaries as well as by Ugandan clergy, educators, and revivalists. The chapter provides the context of Kivebulaya's life and mission, the social upheaval experienced by common people in the kingdom of Buganda. The ritual sacrifices of humans and animals carried out by the Kabaka for protection increasingly exposed the common people to a life of instability and violence. This upheaval left the society open to the innovations introduced by the European missionaries. In light of these experiences, Kivebulaya sought a radical break from the past in his approach to the Christian faith unlike the

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missionaries and elite Christians of his day who sought to establish a connection between selected local customs and deities and the Christian faith.

Given their limited capacity to reach out to large numbers of people, the CMS¹ missionaries in particular encouraged the spread of literacy as a way to evangelize more effectively. The third chapter details how Kivebulaya was drawn into the circle of one of the foremost translators of the Bible, **Henry Wright Duta**,² where he participated in reading and interpreting scripture. The gospel of Matthew pointed to an alternative way of life in society, which was attractive in light of the war and upheaval that Kivebulaya had experienced. Kivebulaya lost his wife early in the marriage, at around the time he was preparing for baptism and resolved never to marry again. This set him apart given the fact that marriage marked full entry into adult life as a Baganda man. This was a radical break with what was socially expected, although at that time, many missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant remained single, due to the hardship of the work of pioneering in missions. In the case of Kivebulaya, Christianity not only loosened social ties, because of the priority of loyalty to God, it also created a new set of social relations based on his loyalty to God.

Kivebulaya's missionary journey to neighboring Toro is the focus of the fourth chapter. Previously exiled Toro leaders who had received baptism while in Buganda provided Kivebulaya with a starting point. Kivebulaya notes however that besides the ruling elite, his communication in Luganda was not well understood by the common people. His commitment to learn Runyoro-Rutoro and to work on a primer won him respect. This was done mainly through organizing reading groups, holding church services, and visiting homes. Several important themes emerge from this chapter: First is the use of biblical narratives by the Toro leadership, notably Omukama Kasagama, for the purpose of uniting the kingdom under one ruler. Second is the place of prominent women at court in promoting the education of women and girls as well as in the role of female Christian teachers. Third is the persecutions faced by Kivebulaya and the other Baganda evangelists due to the suspicions held by the Toro about the Baganda. Kivebulaya's arrest in Mboga led to a deepening of his conversion experience. Kivebulaya became ordained at Namirembe Cathedral and received recognition from the CMS missionaries, who increasingly saw him as a valuable resource and colleague.

¹ The Church Missionary Society, now known as the Church Mission Society, was founded in 1799 by evangelical Anglicans.

² Henry Wright Kitakule Duta was an early Baganda convert to Christianity. He was licensed as one of the first indigenous lay evangelists in what is now Uganda in 1891, became involved in bible translation work, was ordained as a deacon in 1893 and an Anglican priest in 1896. See Louise Pirouet, "Duta, Henry Wright (B)," Classic DACB Collection, *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, n.d., <https://dacb.org/stories/uganda/duta-henry/>

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Kivebulaya's experiences as the senior most clergy man in Toro are described in the fifth chapter. He was involved in teaching and training the first Batoro clergy as well as in examining candidates for baptism and confirmation. Although Kivebulaya epitomized the ideals expected by the European missionaries of African clergymen through his ascetic lifestyle and itinerant teaching, the European missionaries failed to consider the challenges experienced by the African clergy in the work of mission, notably the difficulty of balancing travel with family responsibilities. A second theme in this chapter revolves around the changes to societal life and behavior brought about by the Christian faith. These included abstinence from the consumption of alcohol, as well as greater opportunities for women as through literacy as well as in their role as Christian teachers. In addition, many non-Christian spiritual practices were discontinued, because they came to be viewed as witchcraft. A third theme is that of one of Kivebulaya's most important accomplishments was that he petitioned the CMS in London for the translation of the entire bible in Runyoro at a time when the CMS position in Uganda, was to prioritize the Luganda bible in the development of a national church and to translate only portions of the other Ugandan languages.

The sixth chapter describes Kivebulaya's move from Butiti to Mboga, when he was granted sabbatical leave from his station in late 1915. His intention was to strengthen a church that he had begun about 20 years before. Relocating to Mboga from that time, he spent the next fifteen years planting churches and evangelizing the forest peoples. While holding on to the influences that had shaped him, he nonetheless adapted his methods to fit the new communities he was serving. He opted to travel with and teach the hunter gatherer communities rather than organize their lives around the church and school. Some communities like the Wambutu negotiated access to their community in exchange for new technologies like salt and literacy. However, they protected themselves by moving suddenly and without notice. He also demonstrated divine power through a number of dramatic encounters, which showed his spiritual expertise. In this season, Kivebulaya was no longer able to leverage his connections to the political leadership given that Mboga was under Belgian authority and under the influence of Roman Catholic missions. He navigated the work of church growth amidst the mistrust of both the Belgian authorities and the Catholic missions.

The final chapter describes his final days, up to his death in Mboga. Weakened by his illness and receiving a terminal diagnosis, he was carried back from Buganda by porters at his request. Through making this last journey back to Mboga, Kivebulaya communicates decisively that home for him is now among the faith community he has served over the years, rather than among his community of birth and origin. The chapter also describes the inspiration from

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Apolo's life and death and how young people rallied to the call to take up the work of missions to other people groups because of his example.

Kivebulaya's commitment to be collegial and to find partners enabled his work to succeed. First, after only three months in Toro, Kivebulaya was forcibly returned to Kampala as a prisoner of the Imperial British East Africa Company. Upon his release, he returned to Toro as a member of Bishop Tucker's party, where as one of the fifteen Christian teachers in the party, he was deployed across the kingdom of Toro to evangelize. Second, among the Toro, Kivebulaya himself hardly acknowledged the role of the political interests of the rulers in his acceptance or rejection in the different places where he visited, although he could hardly have been unaware of these interests. He worked closely with previously exiled Toro leaders who had received baptism while in Buganda in order to establish himself. Third, by working with young people in Mboga who became teachers and evangelists Kivebulaya navigated the language barrier among 5 different hunter gatherer communities with whom he worked in his last phase of ministry. These young people would become the next generation of church leaders. Fourth, his travels to Kampala two or three times in a year on foot ensured that the church in Buganda remained aware of his work. During these visits he was able to participate in clergy meetings, staying in touch with other Christian workers and remaining encouraged in the work. He ensured that he did not cut himself off from the center. He remained in touch through prayer and letter writing both at home in Uganda and abroad. Finally navigated around the tensions between the Ugandan clergymen and the European missionaries. A younger more vocal generation pointed out the superior attitude of the whites and the reluctance to release decision making to the locals. While Kivebulaya remained somewhat insulated from these pressures because of his location with the forests of Congo, nonetheless he remained committed to his ideal of a global Christian community.

As noted by Dana Roberts, as early as the 1910 Edinburgh missions conference, global mission was a world-wide vision that included all the continents of the world. However at that time, almost all the students participating in the conference were of European descent.³ From the historical perspective of world Christianity, Apolo Kivebulaya's biography is particularly beneficial for African Christians and African Christian scholars, given that he live and worked in the same general period, between 1865 and 1933.

³ Dana A. Roberts, "Naming 'World Christianity': The Yale-Edinburgh Conference in Historical Perspective," Yale-Edinburgh Group on World Christianity and the History of Mission 2019 meeting at Yale Divinity School, 27 June 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbSYWkuEATs>

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Essentially, this biography points to the fact that at around the same time as young people were being energized by the possibility of evangelizing the world in their generation, Apolo Kivebulaya was similarly energized the possibility of evangelizing the world even moving beyond his own Buganda community into neighboring Toro and later on to the Wambuti in Congo.

The historical development of the academic discourse with regard to World Christianity has mostly been concentrated in North America. An important contribution made by the biography is that it provides insights into the discourse on world Christianity from the lens of an African missionary.

In terms of research it also provides a challenge to African scholars to write the story of African missions.

Editors' note:

The Twaweza Communications edition is available locally in East Africa in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan. Contact:

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