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Title: “I want to be a convinced and influential Catholic”: Catholic Action, lay activism, and Church-society relations in Uganda, 1930-1990

Abstract:

In 1930, the Bakaiso (“Uganda Martyrs Guild”) was founded as a lay association for committed Catholics. Hailed as the establishment of Catholic Action (CA) in Uganda, the Bakaiso and affiliated CA associations remained active throughout the twentieth century, powerfully shaping Ugandan Catholic life by providing a vehicle for catechesis, activism, and lay ministry. Expectations about the role CA members should play in Ugandan socio-political life evolved substantially during the colonial and post-independence periods. Tracing the development of CA affords a privileged glimpse into lay and ordained Ugandans’ evolving understandings of appropriate church-society relations.

Drawing on archival materials—including Rutooro- and Luganda-language handbooks and devotional materials—and oral histories from Uganda, this paper examines changing approaches to church-society relations operative in CA. Initially, ecclesial leaders used CA to cultivate embracing Catholic devotional and social environments capable of insulating parishioners from extra-ecclesial influences. Expectations transformed rapidly after World War II, when CA prioritized forming laypeople to influence neighbors and coworkers, shaping society in light of Catholic values to address political marginalization, economic hardship, and racial inequality. At political independence in 1962, CA’s focus shifted toward contributing to nation-building and development. This paper also considers a trend emerging since 1985 toward the charismatization of CA, and frictions between charismatic faith healing and development through healthcare provision and education.

This paper contributes knowledge about patterns of lay formation and leadership in eastern Africa, Catholic approaches to social activism in colonial and postcolonial contexts, and the growing influence of charismatic spirituality on lay associational life.