

Book Review

Emma Wild-Wood, *The Mission of Apolo Kivebulaya: Religious Encounter & Social Change in the Great Lakes c.1865-1935*

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Written by Prof. Emma Wild-Wood, this book is a comprehensive historical analysis of the life of Apolo Kivebulaya, a Ugandan Anglican Christian who dedicated his life to being a missionary in what is now Western Uganda and Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Prof. Wild-Wood is Professor of African Religions and World Christianity and Co-director of the Centre for the Study of World Christianity at the University of Edinburgh. Having previously lived and taught in both Uganda and DRC, Prof. Wild-Wood's research has focused on religious encounters in East and Central Africa. She has a particular expertise in the growth of mission-initiated denominations in this region from the 1800s to the present day.

With Kivebulaya as the protagonist, Prof. Wild-Wood uses biography to expertly map out the rapid political, social, and religious changes that took place in the interlacustrine region of Uganda and Eastern DRC in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The author reveals how Kivebulaya, a man born as a lowly commoner (*mukopi*) on the fringes of the kingdom of Buganda, became a clergyman, a church founder, and an international missionary of repute during a period of upheaval that was marked by civil war, the emergence of Islam through foreign trade routes, the emergence of Christianity along with European missionaries, and the founding of the Protectorate of Uganda by British colonialists. Prof. Wild-Wood places Kivebulaya in the midst of these changes and demonstrates how they impacted his life and influenced his decisions.

Summary

In the first chapter of this study, Prof. Wild-Wood examines the memorialisation of Kivebulaya. The author notes that Kivebulaya is not remembered on a national stage in the same way the Uganda Martyrs are. There is no national public holiday of remembrance of Kivebulaya. However, he is remembered in writings such as biographies and stories as a model missionary because he “epitomised the missionary belief that profound Christian commitment knew no barriers of race, ethnicity, age and gender” (55). Through “self-sacrifice and hardship,” the author notes, Kivebulaya “continues to be presented as a model for school-children and an important part of African Christian history” (58-59).

The second chapter excavates the early background of Kivebulaya, named “Waswa Kasirye” at birth. “Waswa” indicated that he was an elder twin, while “Kasirye” signified that he belonged to the Nvuma Clan (44, 61). Kivebulaya was born as a commoner in a highly stratified society and grew up during a period of political tumult in Buganda. He possibly apprenticed as a healer in his youth in Singo but eventually moved closer to the capital of Buganda at Mengo Hill to work in road construction.

The next chapter tells the story of how Kivebulaya became a Christian. He took part in the wars of 1888-89 that centred around religion. He initially was fighting in the Muslim faction,

but after his conscience was troubled, he categorically allied himself with the Christians (105). He then fought for the Christians against the Bunyoro Kingdom and the Baganda Muslim party (110). He then enrolled in baptism and started to reshape himself and his obligations by loosening his Buganda socio-cultural ties and considering loyalty to God as paramount, living counter-culturally. For instance, after a short-lived marriage due to the death of his wife, Kivebulaya decided never to marry again (114). Under the patronage of Ham Mukasa, he became a church teacher in Toro and thus began his extraordinary journey as a missionary.

In the fourth chapter, we see how difficult Kivebulaya's time in Toro was at first. After only a few months there, he was imprisoned and returned to Mengo after being falsely accused in December 1895 (135). He returned to Toro the following year, and that became his base. In December 1886, Kivebulaya started making itinerancy trips to Mboga in what is now DRC. He also met hostility in Mboga, being arrested but eventually released (146-154). As he continued his ministry in the Toro Kingdom and in Mboga, Kivebulaya grew in status and became a deacon in December 1900 (154).

The following chapter discusses the growing Anglican church in the Toro Kingdom of Western Uganda and how Kivebulaya's missionary vision was at the heart of this growth. He was the most senior African clergyman in Toro during this time (164), and he became deeply involved in developing mission stations there as well as pursuing social reform through Christian teaching.

In the two final chapters, Prof. Wild-Wood shows how Kivebulaya gave up his well-earned, year-long sabbatical to minister in Mboga. Once he moved to Mboga, he settled there until his death. A highlight of his time there was his travels in the forest to minister to the Mbuti. He was deeply committed to the translation of the Bible to the Mbuti language. During his time in DRC, Kivebulaya facilitated "an understanding of hunter-gatherer peoples as fully human" (261). His translation of Mark's Gospel into the Mbuti language became a tool in producing ethnographic knowledge on pygmies (263).

Evaluation

As a multilingual social historian who has accumulated a wealth of experience in living, teaching, and immersing herself in the life and culture of both Uganda and DRC, Prof. Wild-Wood stands at a unique vantage point for this study. Moreover, her research, publications, and general proficiency in the area of Christianity in both Uganda and DRC from the 1800s to present times lends this book an elevated level of expertise and authority.

Published in 2020, this book offers a timely reminder of the somewhat waning memory of Apolo Kivebulaya, a pioneering African missionary to other Africans. It is a welcome addition to the literature that demonstrates that "modern African Christianity is primarily a product of African agency and initiative" (Hanciles, 2008, 129). Moreover, this book is timely because it contributes to the topic of inculturation of Christianity in Africa. Using Kivebulaya as an example, Prof. Wild-Wood offers a counter-narrative that demonstrates that not all Africans wanted continuity between Christianity and indigenous traditions and religions. He was an outlier who was profoundly counter-cultural and sought for a radical departure from spirit (*lubaale*) worship, polygyny, observing clan rites, and other traditional practices. Kivebulaya "focused on establishing translocal Christian communities which eschewed past customs" (90). He did not focus on a continuity of indigenous traditions within Christianity or an Africanisation of Christianity. Prof. Wild-Wood's counter-narrative, therefore, offers a challenge to "a generation of East African theologians" who have argued for the inculturation of Christianity in Africa and "have been critical of European missionaries who denigrated African culture" (10). She writes that these theologians who were brought up in the last decades

of British rule in East Africa “rarely pondered why earlier generations of Africans, like Kivebulaya, might have welcomed new and foreign cultural systems of meaning as responses to domestic issues” (10).

Prof. Wild-Wood’s study finds a home in the field of World Christianity. World Christianity is an emerging field that encompasses the telling of and learning from stories of how God can and does use local, micro-level agents to create macro-level Christian movements that can have a global impact. The life and mission of Kivebulaya both impacted the East African Revival within the Anglican Church regionally as well as influenced the global missionary movement for a generation. According to Wild-Wood, Kivebulaya was regularly evoked in missionary circles between the 1920s and 1960s (54), and “European missionary writers knew that Kivebulaya outdid them in zeal, tenacity and in goodness” (55).

In addition to the field of World Christianity, students of the history of Christianity—particularly in Africa—will find this book to be of much interest because it “contributes to the religious historiography of the northern Great Lakes region” (2). This study has tremendous depth because it is much more than simply a biography of Kivebulaya. It is also a historical analysis of the rapidly changing social and political environments of Uganda and DRC in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prof. Wild-Wood places Kivebulaya in the larger context of the modern missionary movement, factions among African kingdoms, slave trading of Buganda commoners by the elite and Arab slave traders, and colonisation. As such, students of such topics as missions and the political history of Uganda will also find this volume to be helpful.

The sources that inform Wild-Wood’s research are wide-ranging. These eclectic sources range from university archives to published books and articles to dissertations as well as interviews. Archives from schools such as Makerere University, Cambridge University, University of Birmingham, Uganda Christian University, and Mountains of the Moon University in Fort Portal, Uganda, feature prominently in the sources. The listed bibliography covers a vast array of topics including colonialism, slavery, politics, Islam, homosexuality, race, ethnicity, gender, missions, and inculturation of Christianity. Additionally, the author lists 18 interviews mostly conducted between 2013 and 2015 that inform this book. This all-encompassing bibliography points to the rigour of this study. In producing this volume, Prof. Wild-Wood gives Kivebulaya’s life and mission a deservedly thorough academic and unbiased treatment.

The major strength of this book is how well-researched it is. It is a compelling volume that therefore offers great insight into the political, social, and religious changes in the East-Central African interlacustrine region. In this analysis of the life of Kivebulaya, Prof. Wild-Wood paints him as a counter-cultural, socio-religious reformer who gave up much for the sake of taking the gospel message past international boundaries to unreached people groups. After his death, his memory as an ascetic with a life-long commitment to itineration influenced the East African revivalists who themselves became profoundly influential.

Conclusion

Apolo Kivebulaya is an impressive model of commitment to missions. His ascetism and peace-making especially stand out. So does his humility, which allowed him to arrive in Mboga with a hoe, ready to farm for his food unlike his colleagues Petero Nsuguba and Sedulaka Zabunamakwata (141). It is worth mentioning that, even though the East African revivalists were in part inspired by Kivebulaya, Wild-Wood writes that he would most likely not have been part of it had he been alive. It is likely that he would have questioned the divisive elements of this movement (48-53). Another impressive trait of Kivebulaya is his efforts to learn the

local languages, such as the Toro and Mbuti languages, and his commitment to Bible translation into these languages.

Through this volume, Prof. Wild-Wood stands out as an exemplar of academic scholarship. The rigour of the research that informs this volume is shown by the timeline that it covers. In order to fairly depict, situate, and understand the life and impact of Kivebulaya, the author spares no effort in using a timeline that spans from the 1840s, well before the birth of Kivebulaya (c. 1865), to the contemporary age of growing neo-Pentecostalism in Africa. According to Wild-Wood, “studying Kivebulaya’s life necessitates a wider periodisation of the region’s history than often expected of Christian history of the region” (10).

This book is both an example and an inspiration to continue searching for and telling the untold stories of how God uses ordinary people in extraordinary ways to reveal himself to the world.

References

Hanciles, Jehu (2008). *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.