



## The Ugandan Diaspora in Britain and Their Quest for Cultural Expression within the Church of England

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### ABSTRACT

The article examines the Anglican identity of two Ugandan immigrant communities in Britain and the congregations they have formed in order to foster their social, culture, and spiritual well-being. The two communities are the Acholi, who hail from the northern part of Uganda, and the Baganda from the central region. The former have formed the Acholi London Christian Fellowship while the latter have formed two distinct, yet similar, congregations in two separate London parishes. These are *Okusinza mu Luganda* (Worship in Luganda) and *Ekkalisa y'Oluganda* (the Luganda Church). The second is an offshoot of the first one. This article illustrates that religion and ethnicity are often inextricably intertwined, and that for the immigrants, Anglicanism does not merely displace or replace their native culture, but gives it a new sense of direction as they also shape it in the light of their aspirations. In this sense, we can speak of religious ethnicity, which refers to cases where an ethnic group is linked to a religious tradition shared by other ethnic groups.

**KEYWORDS:** Anglican, culture, Diaspora, ethnicity, identity markers, immigrants, religion, language

Before the mass expulsion of an estimated fifty thousand Asians from Uganda during the military regime of General Amin (1971–1979), the African country was little known on the global scene as a country of emigration to the West. In point of fact, however, a small number of Ugandans lived abroad. They were mostly professionals such as doctors, nurses and midwives, university lecturers, and students.

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But the political instability of post-independence years saw the increase of people from Uganda, mostly from the central region of Buganda, fleeing to other countries. Britain was the preferred destination because of the former colonial ties. Waves of indigenous Ugandan emigration continued under the regime of Amin as large numbers of Ugandans fled from state terror and economic collapse. Although the overthrow of Amin saw a return of exiles from neighbouring countries and farther abroad, it also generated a new wave of exiles and asylum seekers, most of whom fled to the neighbouring countries of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), Sudan, and Kenya.

The 1979 war of liberation, however, did not usher in a period of peace, at least not for the whole of Uganda. Thus, the last three decades have been marked by civil war and acts of insurgency, all of which have led to large numbers of internally displaced persons and people leaving the country for political reasons. In addition, people have emigrated for economic reasons often, but not always, associated with war and political instability. Some migration may be motivated by the search for opportunities or family reunification. Today, there is a sizeable Ugandan presence in Britain, strong and confident enough to form professional, cultural, political, and religious organizations.

Religion constitutes an important medium through which Ugandan immigrants construct their identity, and the church is at the forefront of the places that they and other African immigrants look out for, or seek to join when they come to Britain. In this respect, their experience replicates the experience of Caribbean immigrants to Britain in the post-World War II period. Pre-immigration experience, the challenges of the new environment, and initiative and capacity for innovation inform their orientation within the Church of England. They also shed light on the strategies Ugandan Anglicans have adopted in meeting the pastoral and spiritual needs of their communities. Although several Ugandan Christian congregations<sup>2</sup> have formed in Britain, in this article I will discuss only the Anglican congregations. These are the Acholi London Christian Fellowship (ALCF) and two main Luganda<sup>3</sup> congregations known as *Okusinza mu Luganda* (Worship in Luganda) and *Ekkanisya y'Oluganda* (the Luganda Church), respectively.

In order to shed some light on the pre-immigration experience, it may be instructive to give a statistical picture of religious adherence in

2. Others include the Catholic Uganda Martyrs Community of Britain and Ireland, the Seventh Day Adventists, and various Pentecostal Churches.

3. *Luganda* is the language of the *Baganda* (people) and *Buganda* is their traditional kingdom or region.

Uganda. According to the national census of 2002, Christians made up about 84% of Uganda's population. The Catholic Church has the largest number of adherents (41.9%), followed by the Anglican Church of Uganda (35.9%). The next most reported religion of Uganda is Islam, with Muslims representing 12% of the population.<sup>4</sup> These statistics can be misleading, as they do not include membership of the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches that have mushroomed in Uganda over the last two decades, and which claim a significant following in Britain as well. However, most of those who attend Pentecostal churches have had a background mainly in the Church of Uganda.<sup>5</sup> The factors of ethnicity and – related to it – language further complicate the Christian identity of Ugandans in Britain.

#### *The Acholi London Christian Fellowship*

The ALCF meets at St Matthew's Church in Stratford, East London on the first Sunday of the month. The Acholi hail from northern Uganda and this region has been devastated by a war, which has gone on for almost two decades. At the time of writing, the full-scale war has stopped and been replaced by an intractable and highly doubtful process of peace negotiations. The history of the war is complex and it is not possible to give a detailed account of it in a short paper.<sup>6</sup> However, certain crucial factors can be summarized. One reason given is that it started as a rebellion by former UNLA<sup>7</sup> soldiers as a reaction to the harassment they were subjected to by elements of the National Resistance Army (NRA).<sup>8</sup> But it also seems that the potential for the

4. Uganda Census Report, 2002.

5. Most of those attending the Pentecostal churches in Britain or in Uganda have a background in the Church of Uganda or have a foot in both camps rather than in the Catholic Church.

6. I am working on a longer article that gives more detail about the shifting grounds of politics in post-independence Uganda as background to the experiences and concerns of Ugandans in the Diaspora, which I hope will be published in the future.

7. UNLA is the Uganda National Liberation Army. It was formed as a front of the forces in exile that joined the Tanzanian army to oust the dictator, Idi Amin, in 1979. But it remained the name of the national army even after it had splintered after the disputed elections of 1980 that brought Milton Obote to power a second time.

8. The NRA was the former guerrilla army led by the current President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni. It has since changed its name to Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), and efforts have been made to give it a national character. It has also amalgamated elements from other armed groups.

insurgency was already among the thousands of UNLA soldiers who had suffered a decisive defeat in hostile territory in the south and had relocated to the north with an array of weapons.

Following the initial rebellion, a charismatic woman, Alice Lakwena, who had not been part of the UNLA, became its prophetic leader. Claiming to be a medium of the Holy Spirit, she sought to rally the Acholi nation against the assault of evil and destruction symbolized by the NRA, generally, and its leader, Yoweri Museveni, in particular. After the defeat of Lakwena, the little known Joseph Kony, a former Catholic altar boy, took over the leadership of the rebellion. He renamed it the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Its claimed objective is the restoration of the Ten Commandments, although its record defies the moral content of those Commandments. But the national army has also been accused of committing atrocities in the north. Some have accused its top commanders of using the war to enrich themselves and, therefore, having an interest in its perpetuation. Kony was also difficult to defeat, as he was receiving support from the Sudanese government under the leadership of the National Islamic Front (NIF) as tit for tat for the alleged support of the government of Uganda to the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

The war has left hundreds of thousands of people concentrated in Internally Displaced People (IDP) villages. Supposed to be protected villages, IDP camps were mostly improperly protected and inadequately provided for, and have been sites of indescribable suffering.<sup>9</sup>

The tragedy of the Acholi has been compounded by the fact that most of the terrible atrocities were inflicted by elements from Acholi: a kind of Acholi on Acholi violence. For while the national army stands accused of committing atrocities in the north, the notoriety of the war has particularly been identified with Joseph Kony's methods. These have included the recruitment, abduction, and brutalization of thousands of children who are forced to fight and commit terrible atrocities. The atrocities include the use of girls as sex slaves and horrific forms of mutilation and torture. Northern Uganda is, therefore, faced not only with the trauma of war, but also with the challenge of internal reconciliation and reintegration of thousands of men, women, and children, many of whom committed atrocities against their own people through indoctrination or force.

9. Due to the lull in fighting occasioned by the intractable peace negotiations between the government and the LRA, many people have started leaving the camps to settle back into villages, although lack of resources, the presence of landmines, and insecurity mean that the process is slow.

However, it is not only suffering and victimization that have defined the experience of the Acholi as a people. The Acholi are also people of faith, which they express illustriously in songs and dance accompanied by traditional musical instruments. The group was visible at York Minster at the memorable occasion of the installation of Ugandan-born John Sentamu as Archbishop of York, when they performed during the service, changing the tenor of the entire ceremony.

The Revd Modicum Okello, Priest in Charge of St Matthew's Church, Stratford, has provided leadership for the ALCF. His wife, Doreen, has also given a lot of support as leader of the women in the congregation, member of the choir, and organizer at many of the community's events. Both have provided the point of unity for the Fellowship. The congregation started to meet in 1996 at St John's Church, Stratford, where Okello had been Priest in Charge. They continued to meet there even after he moved to St Matthew's Church, as St John's was considered to be a more central venue than St Matthew's. However, in 2008 the congregation shifted to St Matthew's. But the composition is not all Anglican. It includes Catholics and those who normally attend Pentecostal churches. The ALCF meets for worship on the first Sunday of the month. The major themes of the ALCF are repentance, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and wholeness. The pervasive narrative of worship and other social activities is around the reconstitution of the Acholi as a Christian community of renewal and hope, not only in Britain, but at home as well.

The return to God involves repentance and asking for forgiveness. Only in this way can one become an agent of reconciliation. This perception of the mission of the Acholi is nowhere more grounded than in the celebration of the Janani Luwum Memorial Day, which takes place in the month of February each year. The importance of Luwum is captured in a summary of a sermon of USA-based Mrs Alice Ogwal Abwong, who preached at the Janani Luwum memorial service in 2005. Revd Okello commented on Alice's sermon as follows: 'Janani Luwum has left a legacy of Revival and Christian Mission for the Acholi people, Ugandans, Africa, and the whole world to share. Mama Alice made it abundantly clear in her forty-minute sermon that Janani Luwum shared with us in the light of Christ and Acholi must continue to share the light of Christ'.<sup>10</sup> The call for forgiveness and

10. *Mission at Home and Abroad*, (Acholi London Christian Fellowship Annual Report, 2005), p. 4.

reconciliation is given special urgency by the fact that the war and shifting political allegiances have also created rifts among the Acholi people, both at home and in the Diaspora.

### *Okusinza mu Luganda*

The title translates as Worship in Luganda, Luganda being the vernacular language of the Baganda, the largest single ethnic group in Uganda living in the central region of Uganda. The name Uganda derives from (and is a corruption of) Buganda. Buganda was one of the most powerful centralized kingdoms in East, Central, and Southern Africa at the time of the Partition of Africa. Uganda became a British Protectorate in 1893 and was administered by a system of Indirect Rule, thus leaving the traditional institutions largely intact. The first major political upheaval to hit independent Uganda came when the Prime minister, Milton Obote, abrogated the independence constitution, abolished the kingdoms, and declared the country a republic.

The traditional institutions and 'cultural leaders' have since been re-instated in a non-political form. Nevertheless, Buganda's culture is still strong and its maintenance and rejuvenation has become a central focus for the Baganda, both at home and abroad. Baganda are united through their clan system irrespective of religion or political affiliation. Thus in the UK, Catholic, Muslim, and Protestant Baganda meet together under the *Bika bya Buganda* (clans of Buganda). The focus of unity is the *Kabaka* (King) who is also the *Ssabataka* (head of the clans).

The Luganda congregation started in the 1980s in a church in Walthamstow, where there was a Muganda priest, the Revd Nelson Kaggwa Semuyaba. It shifted to All Saints Church, Forest Gate, where the Revd Henry Settimba was a priest. The congregation worshipped here for five years before moving to St John's Church, Waterloo in 1996. They worship on the first Sunday of the month at 3.00 pm. The writer was the first person to lead the congregation when they moved to St John's Church near Waterloo station. When he left a year later, the Revd Nathan Ntege took over and led the congregation for ten years. Today, the worship leader is the Revd Dr Godfrey Kaziro, a Non-Stipendiary Minister at St John's and a dentist by profession. The Revd Ntege has become Vicar of St Jude with St Aidan, Thornton Heath, in South London where he has also introduced worship in Luganda on the third and last Sundays of the month. The congregation at this Church has been named *Ekkansa y'Oluganda* (the Luganda Church).



The important point to note here is that those attending these services are mostly Anglican Christians and most attend a Church of England church closer to their homes. The congregations are a mixture of professionals and others in semi-skilled or non-skilled employment called *kyeyo* (scrubbing) in Luganda. There is a range of ages in the congregation that include young people and children.

The service is generally traditional and most of the hymns are taken from the Luganda Prayer and Hymn Book called *Ekitabo Eky'okusaba Kw'abantu Bonna* (Prayer Book for All People), which mirrors the BCP and Hymns Ancient & Modern combined, with additions marking the Centenary Celebrations in 1977. The choir forms a major component of the worship life of the congregation.

The Luganda congregations have their calendar year, which reflects the concerns and lived experience of those in the Diaspora. They include women, youth, remembering the dead, Uganda Martyrs Day (First Sunday in June), Independence Day, and Buganda Kingdom Day. Membership is composed mainly of Baganda, but on certain occasions, such as Independence Day, other Ugandan nationals are in attendance. The Ugandan High Commissioner to Britain is usually invited and he or she gives a short speech after the service.

Although the article has featured three congregations, one of the Acholi and two of the Baganda ethnic communities, the latter can be conflated into one. We will therefore discuss the commonalities and differences in the two groups. Firstly, the congregations are both Anglican and reflect the evangelical tradition of the Church of Uganda.<sup>11</sup> This illustrates the place of pre-emigration experience of immigrants. The formation of the worship congregations marks an effort to reproduce in the new environment the conditions prevailing at home, although there is obviously a qualitative difference since home is a different place. However, although the congregations are purveyors of the same Anglican tradition, the identity markers of ethnicity, culture, and language also make them distinctive communities.

Secondly, both congregations revolve not only around worship, but also around the formation of community. A sense of community is something that the immigrants often find lacking in the mainline congregations of the host country. The Ugandan congregations participate in the celebration of events such as baptisms, thanksgiving,

11. The Church of Uganda is 'low church'. However, despite its recent position on the question of sexuality and the thrust of the East African Revival (*Balokole*), the Church of Uganda cannot be described as conservative evangelical.

weddings, and funeral services not only in the precincts of the Church, but as community events.

Thirdly, ethnic discourses associated with language and culture has a tendency to elide other differences in the community such as gender, class, and age. While these are present, the factor of ethnicity and language configure a terrain that transcends the divisions in the interest of a mythical unity. Moreover, it is the process of displacement, uprooting, and resettlement that drive the enactment of narratives of identity found in both the Bible or liturgy and one's ethnic history.