

Title-Catching the Holy Ghost: Mass Conversion and the Africanization of Christianity in East Africa

Alice Auma was born in 1956 in a village near the Gulu District to Severino Lukoya, an Anglican catechist, and Iberina Ayaa, a Catholic woman from a prominent lineage in Acholi. At the time of her birth, the whole of Uganda was ignited by the flame of liberation as the prospect of independence from British rule shifted from plausibility to an inevitability. As a child, Alice attended an Anglican missionary school but only received a few years of formal due to frequent illnesses according to her sister, Doreen. Her religious education continued despite this, in part because of her father Severino Kiberu Lukoya, a catechist with strong ties to the Anglican Church, as well as the influence of the East African Revival in the Luo-Acholi Borderland society of which she belonged.¹

Alice's situation was not unique to her or Acholi children as most in Uganda received their Christian education from indigenous converts before the mid-twentieth century when European missionaries expanded opportunities for formal education to children from non-elite families. Though most children in Uganda learned of the Holy Spirit outside of a missionary school, their proximity, or lack thereof, to the British Colonial Administration impacted their interpretations of Christianity as conversion created opportunities for those closer to the metropole that were less accessible to children in peripheral, borderland societies like Acholi. Christ in Kampala rewarded the modernization of political hierarchies and conformity with the British style of governance, thusly encouraging a nationalist identity. For the Acholi, however, conversion effectively "othered" them as a borderland society.

By 1962, every society in Uganda knew of the gospel, and most converted if not for any other reason than to reap the material benefits conversion promised to them. However, it is important to understand that the literal distance between Kampala, or Mengo, as the capital of Uganda and other Ugandan societies influenced the ways in which the gospel was interpreted. The role of the Holy Spirit in Buganda, for example, reflected the political aspirations of Uganda's most politically powerful ethno-society. The orthodox Anglican Church of Uganda and the Catholic Church utilized the gospel to influence politics and indigenous societies with an understanding of Buganda's impact on the whole of the colony. As a borderland region, the Holy Spirit in Acholi promoted "Acholiness" as a Luo diasporic identity more than a collective Ugandan identity. While the British Administration passively attended to the modernization of the region because of their distance from the metropole, the Holy Spirit formed a special connection with Acholi Christians that did not require them to abandon their shared identity or indigenous practices, including the charismatic veneration of spirits, which made incorporating the Holy Spirit into their pantheon of spirits that much easier.

¹Doreen Auma (Alice Lakwena's Sister), interview by Leslie Whitmire, Moses Okut, and Mike Ocan. November 15th, 2024.

The religious motivations of Alice's movement should be understood within the context of denominational politics as European Anglican and Catholic missionaries competed for political influence during the colonial period and the transition into an independent Uganda. Anglican missionaries proselytized with political aspirations in mind, vying for control over Uganda's future leaders, primarily through missionary education. Catholic missionaries quickly lost the battle for influence in Buganda and recognition as the de facto Church of Uganda, so they concentrated their missionary program on socio-cultural influence in areas like Acholi where Anglicans were not as active because of their seemingly insignificant role in Uganda's political future.² By the 1950s, the rivalry between these denominations was evident in their regional representation, with Catholics having more influence in underdeveloped borderland societies Northern Uganda and the Anglican Church influencing the more developed central and southern regions. Acholi Christians were among the most devout in colonial Uganda, but their devotion did not completely diminish the value of the indigenous belief systems and practices that sustained their connection to the wider Luo borderland society. The symbiosis of Acholi indigenous beliefs and Africanized Christianity resulted in the creation of the Holy Spirit Movement of the late twentieth century as a borderland denomination influenced by a shared struggle against an unstable Ugandan political apparatus.

This chapter analyzes the impact of missionary Christianity in Acholi by focusing on conversion among the Luo as a borderland society straddling the borders of the Congo-DRC, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and South Sudan. Applying Lindsey Scorgie's borderland analytic framework to this period contextualizes the differences in the experience of mass conversion in a peripheral society like the Acholi in juxtaposition with larger political indigenous societies in Uganda, namely Buganda. Comparative analysis of these experiences reveals how missionaries, indigenous Africans, and the British colonial administration utilized missionary Christianity to create a unified political identity in support of the burgeoning state of Uganda in larger polities like Buganda while inadvertently encouraging anti-state sentiments in smaller societies like Acholi. The differences in the conversion experience in Uganda's metropole and the Acholi borderland society influenced the transition into a denominational, independent state that privileged Christians with proximity to state institutions and "othered" peripheral societies, resulting in the contentious relationship between citizens in central and southern regions and those in northern region in independent Uganda. Mass conversion in Acholi strengthened their connection to the Luo diaspora and other borderland societies during the first half of the twentieth century, and in doing so, they established an Africanized Christianity shaped by their spiritual lens of the world. This was especially beneficial to Alice Lakwena when she recruited citizens and soldiers for the Holy Spirit Movement and Mobile Forces in the mid-1980s.

²J.J. Carney, "Three Faces of Public Catholicism in Africa: Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC ." *Journal of Religion and Society* (2024), 165.