

## Uganda's History from the Margins

Derek R. Peterson

Kathryn Barrett-Gaines and Lynn Khadiagala, "Finding What You Need in Uganda's Archives," *History in Africa* 27 (2000), 455–470, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3172127>.

Published in 2000, Kathryn Barrett-Gaines and Lynn Khadiagala's article is one of a long string of eminently practical articles published in *History in Africa*. Much of what they write is rather discouraging: the provincial collections are in a "dismal" state; district court records are difficult to access; only a fraction of the National Archives is catalogued. But the authors also chronicle the extraordinary industriousness of government records officers. In Fort Portal, the district archives were carefully filed in cubbyholes and indexed according to their location on the shelf. Thus file number WS2/6 138/1 referred to a file on the Wooden Shelf, 2nd level, 6th cubbyhole. What emerges from this article is the intensely personal character of archival research. Here is the officer who holds The Key to the attic where the Fort Portal archives are kept. This is his telephone number. Here is the place in Kabale where photocopies can be made. This is the person with whom you must speak to use the archives of the Catholic Church. Uganda is not a place of faceless institutions and impersonal procedures. There is an intimately human set of connections that need to be developed and nurtured in order for research to take place. In the article Barrett-Gaines and Khadiagala give the reader the orientation he or she needs to the social construction of knowledge.

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I must have been Barrett-Gaines and Khadiagala's closest and most enthusiastic reader. In 2000, when their article was published, I had just finished graduate school and was beginning, tentatively, to think about a new project. The first part of my career had been spent in Kenya, where I'd spent a great deal of time nosing about dusty and disorganized piles of paper in the storage rooms of Protestant churches.<sup>1</sup> I was keen to move on—I thought Kenya's historiography was too insular—and so I read Barrett-Gaines and Khadiagala with a great sense of enthusiasm. I still have my original print-out of the article, marked up with circles, telephone numbers in the margins, and exclamation points to highlight particularly important bits of information. I carried it with me in 2003, when I first went to Uganda, and it set the agenda for my research. Barrett-Gaines and Khadiagala had written about an attic in Fort Portal where local government records were kept. I spent several sweaty months there, with wasps buzzing about my head, reading through the collection. Barrett-Gaines and Khadiagala had described a basement where the papers of the Tooro Kingdom were held. I found the basement, convinced an official to give me the key, removed the bicycles, old typewriters, bed frames, and cyclostyled paperwork, and read through the decaying paperwork. Barrett-Gaines and Khadiagala described a dusty attic in Kabale, in southern Uganda, where the district archives could be found. I found my way to the attic, went through the rudimentary hand-list, and unearthed a great number of interesting and relevant files. I found other archives, too, of which Barrett-Gaines and Khadiagala had not known; in Hoima, where there is a rich trove of paperwork in a shed behind the local government office; in Kasese, where there is an archive tucked into the side room adjoining the Chief Administrative Officer's building; in Bundibugyo, where the paperwork has been carefully boxed and filed on metal shelves. In the ensuing years I've spent a great deal of time trying to organize and preserve these important but endangered collections. The National Archives is now catalogued, thanks to the work of a group of graduate students from the University of Michigan and Makerere University. The files in the attic in Fort Portal have been moved to Mountains of the Moon University, where a dedicated group of staff have organized and digitized them. As I write a team from Michigan is in Kabale, cataloguing the files in the dusty attic archive. And there are plans afoot to relocate the archive at Hoima to Mountains of the Moon University, where it will be catalogued, cleaned, and digitized.

It is these local government archives that structured the book I published in 2012, titled *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research that was written up in: Derek R. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Derek R. Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

My interest was in uncovering the debates over marriage, kinship, and propriety occasioned by the East African Revival, a Christian conversion movement that began in southern Uganda and spread through much of eastern Africa in the 1930s and the 1940s. Its converts made a habit of speaking openly about their most embarrassing sins. Their religious practice generated a great deal of controversy, for elders, chiefs and African political leaders thought them to be socially irresponsible. Central government archives are generally empty of information about the Revival. Secure in their positions atop the administrative hierarchy, the central government authorities in Kampala, Nairobi, or Dar es Salaam had little reason to worry about tensions between genders and generations. It was in local politics, in the dynamics of kinship, that revivalist practice generated controversy. It was the sub-bureaucratic official—the chief, the headman, the policeman, the clerk—whose social and political position was fragile, who had to guard his reputation, and who therefore had reason to worry over wives' behavior and the morality of the young. It is their anxieties that percolate through the district and provincial archives. From a fragile social position, marginal both administratively and geographically, political thinkers in the provinces piped their insecurities into paperwork. By their bureaucratic labor they sought to shore up their reputations.

Since 1974 *History in Africa* has been encouraging historians to get outside the comfortable confines of archives in Europe, to open frontiers of research, to look for new collections, to try out new methods, to build networks, to invest time and energy in fresh, original work. The journal reminds us that the canon is not closed, that the source base for African history is not finished, and that the lessons we draw from history must always be tentative, never objective or factual. It is humility that this journal of method teaches us. But it also imposes upon us an ennobling obligation: to uncover the voices of people who were rarely heard in the halls of power.

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