

## *British Colonialism and Nationalism in Uganda 1946-1960s*

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Received: 26/ 06/ 2018; Accepted: 13/ 07/ 2018, Published: 31/08/2018

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**Abstract:** *Uganda is known for having been a British protectorate for decades. The evolution of its colonial history makes it an exception in comparison with the other African colonies under British monopoly. Indeed, when the British came to the area, they could establish strong relations with the natives, in particular the powerful Bugandans, easing their establishment. However, resistance was organized and led to the outbreak of nationalism. Therefore, this paper is a tentative attempt to show how the British settled down in the area, how Ugandan nationalism rose and the extent of its success.*

**Keywords:** Great Britain- Uganda- Colonialism- Nationalism

**Résumé:** *L'Ouganda est connu pour avoir été une des colonies Britanniques de l'Afrique de l'est et ce pendant des décennies. L'évolution de son histoire coloniale la rend une exception par rapport à d'autres colonies Africaines sous le control Britannique. En effet, quand les Britanniques se sont installés, ils ont pu établir des relations fortes avec les natifs, en particulier, les puissants Bougandais, une relation qui a pu faciliter leurs installations. Toutefois, une opposition s'est organisée et a mené à l'émergence du nationalisme en Ouganda. Par conséquent, cet article a pour objectif de montrer comment les Britanniques se sont établies en Ouganda, comment le nationalisme Ougandais a émergé et l'étendue de son succès.*

**Mots clés :** Grande Bretagne- Ouganda- Colonialisme- Nationalisme.

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### **1. Introduction**

The nineteenth century was characterized by the establishment of colonial rule in Africa. Uganda was no exception since it became a protectorate in 1894. However, Ugandans did not acquiesce so easily to colonial rule, since they organized protest and riots. All this culminated in the rise of nationalism. To this end, this paper

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attempts to deal with the context in which Great Britain settled in Uganda and converted it into a protectorate, the reasons behind the rise of Ugandan nationalism, and the extent of its success or failure. Therefore the following questions are raised: How did the British impose their authority in the area? What were the reasons behind the Ugandan nationalism? To what extent did it succeed?

## **2. British Colonial and Establishment and Policy in Uganda**

The official establishment of British colonial administration in Uganda started with the signature of an agreement with the most powerful tribe of the area, the Buganda tribe in 1900.<sup>(1)</sup> This agreement was enacted by the Queen's Special Commissioner for the Uganda Protectorate, Sir Harry Johnston with the help of Sub-Commissioner, F.C. Jackson, Bishop Tucker and the Buganda chiefs. Under the terms of this agreement, the Buganda kingdom was divided into twenty counties, each controlled by a chief.

Other agreements were signed with neighboring kingdoms of Buganda and culminated in the formation of the Uganda Protectorate. Indeed, the good relationship that the British shared with the Bugandans helped them sign these treaties. The kingdoms in question included Ankole, annexed in October, 1900, Toro, on 26<sup>th</sup> June, 1900, and the Bunyoro kingdom, annexed in 1933. There were other kingdoms such as Bouzinza and Kiziba. Nevertheless, it made these tribes under the control of their old enemy, the Buganda tribe.

To manage the Ugandan protectorate, the colonial administration notably relied on the indirect rule system, which consisted in using the traditional elite to rule the Ugandan population. It also converted land possession from community to individual possession. In addition, it imposed taxes, namely the

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<sup>1</sup>Though the Berlin Conference (1884-5) succeeded in determining the sphere of influence of each of the colonising powers in Africa, the case of Uganda was not mentioned. Meanwhile, the German explorer, Dr. Carl Peters signed a protectorate treaty with the Buganda chief, Kabaka Mwanga. The British then decided to exchange their Holigo Island with Uganda, to leave it to the British Company, then to be taken back by the British government in 1894. Ki-Zerbo, Joseph. (1978). *Histoire de l'Afrique Noire d'Hier a Demain*. Paris: Hatier. p.411.

Hut and Gun Taxes, and started growing cotton and coffee to finance the colonial administration and its decisions.

Nonetheless, the process of annexation was not peaceful since it engendered some uprisings among the natives, representing the early forms of nationalism in the area. These could be seen in the mutiny organized by the Bunyoro and Ankole, which took place in 1897 against the newly established British authority. It ended up in its quelling, and resulted in the British colonial administration strengthening its position through establishing a strong administration made of a legislative council in 1920; it included more Buganda chiefs in the colonial administration to rule with the British. Still, it did not prevent Ugandan nationalism to break out for political, economic and social reasons.

### **3. Factors behind the Outbreak of Nationalism in Uganda**

Nationalism started in the Uganda protectorate after the end of the Second World War on account of a number of factors. The latter included the demand for better political consideration from the part of the Ugandans working for the colonial administration, the measures undertaken by the British government in the Ugandan economic field, the Asians' monopoly of the working and trading sectors, the demand for better social living conditions and the British government's intention of creating a federation counting Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika.

The period under discussion was characterized by the political dissatisfaction coming from both the traditional and educated elite. They wanted to have better political considerations from the colonial administration. This was notably the case of the Bataka Movement and the Native Civil Servants Association in the 1920s.

Moreover, though the end of the Second World War period was not marked by the deterioration of the economic sector in the Uganda protectorate, certain measures undertaken by the British government stirred up the Ugandans' dissatisfaction. In the agricultural sector, the farmers, who notably grew cotton, criticized the low revenues they received from the world sales of cotton, compared with those received by the British government.

In addition, the availability of imported goods to the protectorate became limited and therefore their prices rose<sup>2</sup>.

As a result, claims for welfare improvements started to be heard. Moreover, the Indians, who had settled in the Uganda protectorate to work the Ugandan railway that was to lead to Kenya, acquired monopoly over the working and trading sectors, and represented a problem for the Ugandans.<sup>(3)</sup> This monopoly could be seen in the fact that the Asian middlemen exploited the Ugandan cotton producers in their transactions, and the Indian monopoly of the processing ginneries since the Indian middlemen exploited the cotton producers. Their criticism came mainly from associations such as the Young Basoga Association, the Young Acholi Association, the Young Lango Association, the Young Bagwere Association, the Bugisu Welfare Association and the Uganda Motor Drivers Association.

In addition, the British government's attempt to create an East African Federation made of Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika was also a controversial issue. In fact, for the Ugandans, this attempt was conspicuous in the establishment of the East African High Commission in 1946, which aimed at linking together a number of East African common services,<sup>(4)</sup> and the central African Federation in 1953 made of Malawi, Zambia and Rhodesia.<sup>(5)</sup> The Ugandans opposed this federation because of tribal parochialism and the fear to come under the control of the European white settlers in Kenya. These factors altogether engendered fear, suspicion and hatred among the natives, giving birth to a nationalist movement that took different aspects in Uganda.

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<sup>2</sup> These imported goods were not produced in the protectorate and their availability depended on their import. As a result, their prices rose, which aroused the discontent of the population. Cornevin, Marianne. (1972) *Histoire de l'Afrique Contemporaine*. Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot. p.71.

<sup>3</sup> Apter, David E. (1997). *The Political Kingdom in Uganda*. London: Frank Cass Publishers. pp.46-51.

<sup>4</sup> These services notably included a common currency and a joint airline and postal system. Murphy, E. Jefferson. (1968). *Understanding Africa*, Great Britain: Murphy Cromwell. p.176.

<sup>5</sup> In 1953, the British Governor, Sir Andrew Cohen, made a speech where he declared that the British government's intention to set up an East African Federation was "groundless". Low, D.A. (1971). *Buganda in Modern History*. Great Britain: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. p.109.

#### 4. The Ugandan Nationalism

The Ugandan nationalist movement was conspicuous in the foundation of associations such as the Butaka Union in 1946 and the Uganda African Farmers Union (U.A.F.U) in 1947.<sup>6</sup> The former was formed by Semakula Mulumba and the latter by Ignation Musazi. As far as the membership of these associations was concerned, it was almost made of angry peasants ready for radical initiatives.

Their action, which was inspired by the political, economic and social grievances of the population, in particular the peasantry, represented a radical attack on the traditional authority, the Asians, the Christian Missionaries and the colonial administration. Still, these associations could not achieve their objectives since they were banned.

The movement carried on during the 1950s with the foundation of political parties. The latter included the Uganda National Congress in (U.N.C.) 1952, the Progressive Party (P.P) in 1953, the Democratic Party (D.P.) in 1956, the Uganda United Congress (U.U.C.) in 1957, the Uganda People Union (U.P.U) in 1958, the Uganda National Party (U.N.P.) in 1959 and the Uganda People Congress (U.P.C.) in 1960.

These political parties differed and varied in their background, the motives of their formation, their membership and the objectives to reach. In fact, they were either Anglican or Catholic, pro-Buganda or anti-Buganda political parties. They could include different sections of the Ugandan society regardless of their origin, color, religion, educational level or social status, or confine the membership of the party to a definite group. However, they shared one common objective, which was the spread of nationalism in the protectorate. They notably asked for better political representation by asking for legislative reforms to the traditional chiefs as well as the colonial administration. They also tried to defend the economic interests of the Ugandans in

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<sup>6</sup> The origins of the Union's name have to do with ancient burial rights of the peasantry. Though the members did not consider their Union as a party, some considered it as a political party. Hatch, John. (1965). *A History of Postwar Africa*. USA: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers. p.131.

front of the growing menace of the Europeans and Asians. Others aimed at gaining self-independence as it was the case of the U.N.C. Party.

The Ugandan nationalist movement was mainly characterized by the riots of 1945 and 1949 and the deportation of the Kabaka Mutesa II in 1953, and all these events witnessed the involvement of these associations and political parties. Indeed, in 1945, a group of educated Ugandans expressed their dissatisfaction with the traditional authority. Indeed, they wanted the removal of a Ugandan chief, Serwano Kulubya, who occupied the office of Treasurer. This protest ended up with the resignation of Serwano Kulubya from his office. Furthermore, in 1949, both the Butaka Union and the Uganda African Farmers Union organized a three-day strike at the entrance of the Kabaka's palace, in both April and May, during which all the chiefs were targeted. The result was the burning of the chiefs' houses and offices. They also drafted a petition to the Kabaka where they listed five demands aiming at having more and better representation and more participation in the processing and marketing of cotton. Notwithstanding, these riots were finally crushed down with the ban of the Butaka Union and the U.A.F.U, with Mulumba being deported and Musazi under house arrest.

As a corollary, the Watson Commission was appointed and sent on the spot in order to inquire into the causes of these riots. The Commission concluded that the main reasons were of economic order, and suggested the creation of a Bank of Agriculture and a Marketing Board. It also encouraged the creation of cooperatives for the producers of cotton.<sup>(7)</sup>

In 1953, another conflict emerged, this time opposing the Kabaka to the British colonial administration. All this started during an official dinner, when the Secretary of State, Oliver Lyttleton suggested to the Kabaka the creation of an eastern federation, including Uganda. The response of the Kabaka was to demand the transfer of the Uganda protectorate from the Colonial Office to the Foreign Office, and later on, asked the secession of the Buganda Kingdom from the Uganda protectorate. The British government's response was the signature of a declaration

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<sup>7</sup>The first cooperative of this kind was founded by J.K. Musazi. Cornevin, Marianne. p.204.

withdrawing the British recognition to the Kabaka Mutesa II and to avoid disturbance, he was deported to London.

This aroused stupor and discontent among the Ugandans. As a result, the Lukiko, which was made of young western educated professional men, recently elected, appointed a delegation to go to London in order to negotiate the Kabaka's return to the Uganda protectorate. Once there, this delegation received the backup of 'Africanist' groups in the churches, the press, the universities and the Labour Party. Then, the delegation met the Colonial Secretary, Oliver Lyttleton to discuss the Kabaka's return to Uganda. Even though, he accepted the demands of the Colonial Secretary, the response of the Colonial Secretary was negative.

The Ugandan political parties operating at that time also protested against the deportation of the Kabaka. The U.N.C, for example sent a delegation to London in 1953 in order to negotiate his return. Still, this delegation was confused and lacked organization leading to the failure of the negotiations. In 1954, it resumed the protest by organizing the boycott of the non-African merchants. This was followed, one year later, by the demand for self-government.

The issue was finally solved with the organization of the Namirembe Conferences in 1954. Indeed, meetings were held between British and Ugandans in Namirembe, about a number of issues such as the establishment of a federal constitution, the Buganda boycott of the Uganda legislative council and the position of the Buganda kingdom in the light of these new events. The outcome of these meetings was positive in the sense that both sides took compromising decisions. In addition to this, the Kabaka Mutesa II was allowed to go back to Uganda. However, the Ugandan nationalist movement failed owing a number of reasons.

## **5. The Failure of the Ugandan Nationalist Movement**

Actually, these achievements were less important and different from the nationalist movements which emerged in other British colonies. This was due to many reasons, namely the conflicting relationship between the educated elite and the traditional chiefs, especially those of the Buganda tribe, and between the Buganda tribe and the other tribes, the almost absence of demand for

independence, the lack of interest of Ugandan politicians, the ineffective role of the national press and the lack of a lingua franca common to all the areas forming the Uganda protectorate.

First of all, most of the educated elite's attacks were not directed to the colonial administration, as it was the case of the rest of the British colonies, but to the traditional authority. In fact, their intention was not to overthrow the British alien rule, but to end up with the political monopoly of the traditional chiefs. Besides, the lack of unity, which resulted from the past conflict between the Buganda tribe and the neighboring kingdoms, as it was seen, was an obstacle to the achievement of nationalism.

In addition, the members of the political parties were not full-time politicians since they occupied administrative jobs. This had obviously prevented them from being at the disposal of their political activities. Moreover, the educated men who had studied abroad were few and less influential in spreading their nationalist ideas. Furthermore, the division of the protectorate into tribal units prevented the colony from having a national party speaking for all the Ugandans.

Another reason which prevented nationalism in Uganda from being effective was the weak role of the national press. In fact, the Uganda press was also responsible for the delay of nationalism. It published articles that were only limited to the Buganda kingdom, and neglected the events that took place in the neighboring ones. Furthermore, it did not emphasize the role of the political parties since it lacked the political news that would attract the population's interests. Moreover, nationalism in Uganda could not succeed because of the lack of a lingua franca, which would have gathered the peoples of the different kingdoms. As it is generally believed that these peoples spoke different languages and a common language would have helped them to unite.

## **6. Conclusion**

To sum it up, the coming of the British in Uganda culminated in the establishment of the Uganda protectorate. As it has been shown, the Uganda protectorate was different from the other colonies since the most powerful Ugandans, namely the Bugandans, accepted British authority and submitted the others under it. In addition, they had a share in the management of the



protectorate. But, it did not prevent nationalism to break out in Uganda. Indeed, nationalist movements emerged in the form of protest and riots, associations and political parties. Still, it was a failure mainly because of the lack of unity among the Ugandans.

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