
Reviewed by Carol Sicherman (Lehman College, City University of New York)  
Published on H-Africa (February, 2007)

**Makerere Students: Challenging Authority?**

In this book, originally his UCLA dissertation, Frederick Byaruhanga disputes the common opinion that Makerere students, disinclined to take risks that might imperil their careers, have been as conservative as their fabled university. In cataloguing and expounding on student challenges to authority since 1952 (when Makerere became a university-level institution), he tells a virtually unknown story largely through local newspapers and forty-one interviews. The ex-demonstrators whom he interviewed are now MPs and government ministers, officials in the World Bank and NGOs, educators, lawyers, and business people. Byaruhanga, the first scholar to tackle head-on the question of student power at Makerere, has chosen a topic important to both Uganda and the region, for until the early 1960s Makerere educated nearly all the elite of East and Central Africa.

After three introductory chapters—a summary of Ugandan history as it pertains to Makerere; an overview of education in Uganda; and a survey of student activism with emphasis on African universities—Byaruhanga marches, decade by decade, from the 1950s through 2005. Each chapter provides the political context, a chronology of the events, and an “interpretive reflection.” Two final chapters sum up the findings and implications for research and policy.

Byaruhanga distinguishes three types of activism: "welfare-related," ideological, and "survival." The first significant protest (in 1952), a boycott of the dining halls in a demand for better food, concerned student "welfare"—a matter of psychological as well as culinary comfort. Ideology-inspired protest in the 1960s as students demonstrated against American bombing in northwestern Uganda (a spill-over from conflict in Congo) and the hanging of three African nationalists by the Smith government in Rhodesia. A decade later (in 1976), students plotted, bravely but unsuccessfully, to overthrow the Amin government.

"Survival" demonstrations, increasingly frequent from the early 1980s to the present, are a post-Amin version of the earlier "welfare" protests, with two differences. First, student leaders have emphasized the principle of self-determination. Second, both the student demonstrations and ensuing government repression have been characterized by serious violence. In December 1990, the new Student Guild president (Norbert Mao, now a leading MP) spearheaded a rejection of a Guild constitution imposed by the Ministry of Education. Even as he put forward a host of economic "survival" issues—the abolition of allowances for books, transportation, and stationery—Mao connected the protests with the government’s costly pursuit of war in the north and its tolerance of corruption. The government sent police to campus just as students were discussing calling off the strike. Police shot two students to death, and the university closed.[1] As Byaruhanga remarks, the weak Makerere administration was "sandwiched" between students and government (p. 111).

The proximate cause of the 1990 tragedy was the de-
Byaruhanga’s interest in the impact of students on universities is in keeping with the broader inclination in African studies to examine agency of supposedly subservient groups. How much of an impact have students had on Makerere? Very little, this book implies; no one has learned the lessons of the past. The foresight and flexibility exhibited by Ssebuwufu appear to have left little trace, vanquished by the equally authoritarian traditions inherited from pre-colonial and colonial cultures. Students continue to erupt in violent protest. National politics echoed on campus compound the antagonisms.

Byaruhanga has much to teach students leaders and university administrations in Africa. He pro-poses additional lines of research—cross-national comparisons (beginning with the sister universities in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam), exploration of gender roles in student activism, and “the nexus between student activism and political aspiration” (p. 162). To this list other topics could be added, including examination of what students do not protest and what administrations do not do. Students have been indifferent to the marked inequalities of access to Uganda’s flag-ship university. The breathtaking lack of consultation of students by government and university is matched by the apparent failure of the university to enlist the expertise of those teaching in its own Master of Arts in Peace and Conflict Studies.

A good deal of this book is a chronicle of events. Byaruhanga makes excellent use of eyewitness accounts, particularly of the past thirty years. His analysis, although sparse, is insightful. While the research on the protests themselves is quite rich, in other areas it is thin. Some topics could be better fleshed out, such as the complex question of autonomy (of the Student Guild, of Makerere itself vis-à-vis the government), the failed “needy students” scheme, and certain features of Makerere student life that will be unfamiliar to outsiders.

This book blazes a trail for scholars of higher education in Africa. Byaruhanga’s interviews show the value of oral history and make one long for memoirs by veterans of Ugandan higher education.[3] His call for analysis of student power in Kenya and Tanzania, essential for comparative study, should be heeded. Policy-makers in universities and ministries of education need good information about the past if they are to avoid the discouraging replication of mistakes.

As it happens, Byaruhanga and I were in email contact while both of us were researching books about Makerere (we have never met).[4] It was he who told me that a Routledge editor, having read the abstract of his thesis in Dissertation Abstracts International, had proposed publication in a series edited by Molefi Asante. Taking worthy dissertations off the proverbial dusty shelf is a good thing, but dissertations inevitably require revisions before becoming books. It appears that neither Routledge nor the series editor expected revision or offered the slightest editorial help. It is inexcusable that a short book priced at $65 should be replete with a wide variety of errors. Misspelled names render follow-up impossible: the historian Nakanyike B. Musisi is given in the bibliography and in citations as “Nakanyike, M.”; another source, Sef tel, is spelled in three different, incorrect ways (pp. 3-5, 173; the name appears correctly on p. 7); the journalist John Eremu is sometimes cited as Elemu. Most of the other types of errors, although distracting, do not impede understanding. Editors and publishers, who surely know that newly minted academ-ics cannot resist the lure of publication, are professionally obligated to ensure that the books they sell are worthy in all respects. Both Routledge and Asante have much to answer for in this regard.

Finally, the price puts the book out of reach of the very readers whom it could benefit most. The African scholarly world would welcome a corrected edition at an affordable price by a Ugandan publisher.

Notes

[1]. The first closure occurred a year earlier, in November 1989.

[2]. On 3 November 2006, staff struck to demand that the Ugandan government honor a pledge made in April
2004 for a salary increase. On November 12, Museveni ordered Makerere closed; on December 5 he ordered it to reopen in January 2007; a student demonstration on December 7 in support of the strike was suppressed. See the chronology to date in Evelyn Lirri, “Makerere Strike: Will the Lecturers’ Spirit Crack?” Monitor (12 December 2006).

[3]. One example is W. Senteza Kajubi, who has publicly expressed regret for his failure to avoid the ultimately fatal confrontation in 1990 during his second stint as Makerere’s Vice-Chancellor (John Eremu, “Kajubi Regrets 1990 Makerere Killings,” New Vision (3 April 2004). Kajubi and Makerere’s long-time Registrar, Bernard Onyango, are only two of the veteran academics and administrators whose vast knowledge needs to be recorded.


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12865

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.