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Lending Meaning to Catholic Presence in Uganda: The Story of Cardinal Emmanuel Nsubuga 1966-1969

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Abstract

This article examines the legacy of Cardinal Emmanuel Nsubuga in shaping Uganda's Catholic religious heritage through the creation, preservation, and revitalisation of sacred spaces. While scholarship has largely emphasized Nsubuga's political leadership during Uganda's turbulent decades, this study foregrounds his role in Catholic memory-making and spatial politics in the 1960s. Drawing on archival records, oral interviews, and secondary literature, the article analyses three major initiatives: the construction of Namugongo Catholic Martyrs Shrine, the repatriation of the remains of early Catholic missionaries, and the monumental preservation and social transformation of Nalukolongo, one of the earliest Catholic preaching sites in Buganda. It argues that Nsubuga's interventions strategically reinforced Catholic identity and historical presence within a religious landscape historically dominated by Protestant institutions. His efforts mobilised religious memory, architectural symbolism, and indigenous cultural values, particularly the veneration of ancestors and care for the vulnerable, to produce a distinctly Ugandan expression of Catholicism. Through these material and spiritual projects, Nsubuga embedded Catholic heritage in Uganda's national consciousness, fostered communal devotion, and advanced the Church's social mission. The article positions Nsubuga as a central architect of Uganda's modern Catholic landscape and as a key figure in the ongoing negotiation of religion, memory, and public life.

Keywords: Catholic heritage, Cardinal Emmanuel Nsubuga, sacred spaces, Uganda Martyrs

Introduction

On the morning of June 3, 1969, thousands of Catholic pilgrims from various parts of Africa gathered at Namugongo. Their voices rose in devotional hymns,

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mingling with the scent of incense that filled the air as they awaited the arrival of Pope Paul VI, the first pontiff to visit sub-Saharan Africa. His mission was momentous, for he came to consecrate the altar at the newly constructed Namugongo Catholic Martyrs Shrine. His presence inscribed Namugongo onto Uganda's sacred geography and the global Catholic map. Yet, beneath the celebration, ululations, and prayers lay a largely overlooked story: the tireless work of Emmanuel Cardinal Nsubuga, whose vision and determination were instrumental in conceiving and building the shrine. While Namugongo has become an iconic pilgrimage site, few recognize that it was not the Vatican but Cardinal Nsubuga who led the effort to establish this monumental space of devotion.

In the years preceding the shrine's construction, Nsubuga navigated a landscape of religious memory, post-colonial nationalism, and interdenominational rivalry to fundraise and build a Catholic shrine that would anchor Uganda's Catholic story on the very soil where the first Ugandan Catholic martyrs were burned. At the time, Uganda's religious skyline was dominated by the Protestant Church with Namirembe Cathedral, designed by Beresford Pite in a modified Arts and Crafts Gothic style and completed in 1919, standing as an Anglican prestigious religious landmark within the Buganda Kingdom. In contrast, the Catholic Church's presence was centred at Rubaga Cathedral, consecrated in 1925. Against this backdrop, Nsubuga sought to reassert Catholic prominence in Uganda's religious and political life. His efforts at Namugongo formed part of a broader strategy to mobilize religious memory, establish Catholic sacred spaces, and assert the Catholic Church's role in shaping Uganda's spiritual and national identity. A key milestone in this endeavour was the construction of the Namugongo Catholic Martyrs Shrine, designed by Swiss architect Justus Dahinden and completed in 1976. Through such monumental projects, Nsubuga reinforced the centrality of Catholicism in Uganda's religious consciousness, leaving a lasting physical and symbolic legacy. As such, his works support Alison Bennet's argument that material religious artefacts and sacred spaces play a vital role in shaping religious identity, fostering cross-cultural exchange, and symbolizing local agency.2

This article examines Nsubuga's strategic interventions in Uganda's religious landscape by analysing three key initiatives: the construction of Namugongo Catholic Martyrs Shrine (1965-1969), now the largest pilgrimage destination in East Africa, the repatriation of the remains of the early French missionaries (1972-1974), which re-inscribed missionary memory into Uganda's religious landscape, and the preservation of Nalukolongo, the second Catholic mission station in Buganda. Drawing on archival records from the Rubaga Cathedral archive, oral interviews, and secondary sources, the article argues that Nsubuga's efforts in creating and preserving Catholic sacred spaces constituted a deliberate project of memory work, spatial politics, and religious heritage making. By leveraging the materiality of sacred spaces, he reinforced the historical presence of Catholicism, asserted spiritual authority, and enhanced the Church's national significance. However, Nsubuga's works must be placed and understood within a broader historical context of missionary work and the start of Catholicism in Uganda.

2 Alison Bennett, 'Objects of Catholic Conversion in Colonial Buganda: A Study of the Miraculous Medal,' Journal of Religion in Africa 51, no. 1-2 (2021).

Historical Background

The introduction of Christianity to Uganda in the late nineteenth century set the stage for profound political and religious transformations, particularly within the Buganda Kingdom. Protestant missionaries from the Church Mission Society (CMS), a British Anglican organisation, arrived in 1877 at the invitation of Kabaka Muteesa I, who was eager to learn about Christianity. Two years later, Catholic missionaries, the White Fathers, led by Fr. Simon Lourdel (Mapeera) and Brother Amans, arriving in 1879.[3] This missionary presence, initiated by a French Roman Catholic society founded by Cardinal Lavigerie in 1868, profoundly shaped Uganda's religious and political landscape.

Buganda soon became the epicentre of both political power and religious activity. The *kabaka*s of Buganda shifted allegiance between factions, creating a religious hybrid environment. However, tensions soon arose, particularly under the rule of Kabaka Mwanga, who, despite initially welcoming the missionaries, became concerned about the growing rivalry between the two Christian factions. His attempts to curtail the influence of both factions culminated in the execution of nearly 200 young Christian converts, now known as the Uganda Martyrs. This persecution united Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim groups against Mwanga, leading to his overthrow in 1888.

Following Mwanga's overthrow, a Muslim king, Kabaka Kalema, briefly ruled before being ousted by a Catholic-Protestant alliance in 1889. However, this alliance soon fractured, igniting religious wars in 1892 between the Catholic and Protestant factions. The conflicts were deeply rooted in the historical rivalry between Catholicism and Protestantism in Europe, which was now mirrored in the Buganda Kingdom's socio-political structure. Historian Kevin Ward describes this rivalry as an extension of centuries-old religious conflict, transplanted onto Uganda.[4]

The Protestants ultimately emerged victorious in the nineteenth-century wars, aided by Captain Frederick Lugard's Imperial British East African Company (IBEACO). This victory solidified Protestant dominance in Uganda, which British colonial efforts further entrenched through the Buganda Agreement of 1900, disproportionately allocating land and political positions to Protestant chiefs. For example, the CMS secured fifty-two square miles of land, and Protestant chiefs controlled the majority of Buganda's counties and administrative roles. In contrast, Catholics, despite forming a larger Christian denomination, were politically marginalised. This imbalance extended beyond Buganda, as seen in Bunyoro, where only one of six counties was allocated to Catholic chiefs.[5]

3 Holger Bernt Hansen, Mission, Church and State in Colonial Setting: Uganda 1890-1925 (London: Heinemann, 1984). Alyward Shorter, Cross and Flag in Africa: The 'White Fathers' During the Colonial Scramble (Maryknoll: NY: Orbis Books, 2006), Kevin Ward, A History of Christianity in Uganda (Kampala, Uganda: Fountain Publishers, 2001), J. M. Waliggo, 'The Bugandan Christian Revolution: The Catholic Church in Buddu, 1879-1896,' in Christianity and the African Imaginations: Essays in Honour of Adrian Hastings, eds. David James Maxwell, and Ingrid Laurie (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 64.

4 Kevin Ward, 'A History of Christianity in Uganda,' in From Mission to Church; A Handbook of Christianity in East Africa (Uzima Press, Nairobi Kenya, 1991), 84.

5 'Uganda Letter from Roman Catholic Chiefs to the District Commissioner Bunyoro,' December 9, 1927. Dossier 203, Missionary of Africa Archives (henceforth GMAfr).

A key aspect of Protestant dominance in colonial Uganda was the establishment of physical spaces that reinforced their social and political control. The Anglican Cathedral at Namirembe Hill became the epicentre of Anglican influence, with its repeated construction funded by Protestant chiefs and supported by Buganda's monarchy. For instance, in 1914, local Anglican chiefs contributed thirty per cent of their annual rent earnings until the cathedral was completed. That same year in April, Kabaka Chwa sent his court pages, including personal guards, to assist in the construction, personally visiting the site to boost the morale of the workers.[6] Initially, financial contributions were solicited exclusively within Buganda, but by 1917, Bunyoro also began to support the project. The cathedral became not only a religious centre but also an emblem of political and economic dominance.

By the mid-twentieth century, as Uganda approached independence, Protestant dominance persisted. Catholics, long excluded from political power, increasingly sought to challenge this hegemony, advocating for greater representation in governance and public life. The 1961 elections, which saw the annulment of the victory of Catholic political leader, Benedicto Kiwanuka, exemplified this Protestant control.

In this climate, Cardinal Emmanuel Nsubuga emerged as a key architect of Catholic counter-culture. Aware that Catholics operated in a historically hostile political and social environment, Nsubuga sought to create spaces, institutions, and memorialisation initiatives that would solidify Catholic identity, presence, and community. Through his commitment to establishing and preserving sacred spaces, Cardinal Nsubuga provided Ugandan Catholics with a tangible connection to their faith, allowing them to engage more intimately with their religious heritage.

Who is Cardinal Nsubuga?

Emmanuel Cardinal Nsubuga played a significant role in shaping Uganda's Catholic heritage, leaving a lasting impact through his leadership and religious devotion. His life journey was marked by significant milestones deeply influenced by his Christian faith and Marian devotion rooted in the material expressions of Catholicism in Uganda, such as the use of the Miraculous Medal, which Alison Bennet discusses as having permeated Ganda culture in Buddu province.[7]

Born on November 3, 1914 in Kisule, Ssingo County (now part of Kiyinda Mityana Diocese), Nsubuga was raised in a devout Catholic household by his parents, Felix and Estelli Nsubuga. His baptism at Busuubizi Catholic Parish laid the foundation for his lifelong commitment to the Catholic church. His educational pursuits took him through Bukuumi Primary School, Bukalasa Minor Seminary, and Katigondo Major Seminary, where he underwent training in theology. On December

6 'The Making of Namirembe Cathedral,' *Daily Monitor*, September 12, 2019. https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/the-making-of-namirembe-cathedral-1847456.

7 Bennet, 'Objects of Catholic Conversion in Buganda,' 24-27. See also J. M. Waliggo, 'The Bugandan Christian Revolution: The Catholic Church in Buddu, 1879-1896' in Christianity and the African Imaginations: *Essays in Honour of Adrian Hastings*, eds. David James Maxwell, and Ingrid Laurie (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 86. Marian Devotion had early roots in Buddu, particularly through the material significance of the miraculous medal, which embodied a devotion to Mary's protective powers. The medal used by missionaries as an object of evangelising and propagandising strategies, while for the Baganda it played a key role in the emerging form of local religious identity politics.

15, 1946, he was ordained a priest at Rubaga Cathedral, marking the beginning of a distinguished ecclesiastical career.[8]

In his early priesthood, Fr. Nsubuga served in several parishes, including Mubende, Gayaza, and Konge, where he gained valuable pastoral experience. His administrative abilities led to his appointment as vicar general of Rubaga Archdiocese on June 10, 1962. This position prepared him for greater responsibilities within the Catholic Church. When Archbishop Joseph Kiwanuka passed away in 1966, Nsubuga was entrusted with overseeing the diocese as vicar capitular until a new Archbishop could be appointed. Later that year, he was officially named and consecrated archbishop of Kampala on October 10, 1966, becoming the third Catholic archbishop in Uganda's history after Archbishop Joseph Kiwanuka (1961-1966) and Archbishop Louis Joseph Cabana (retired 1960). His leadership was further recognized when Pope Paul VI elevated him to the rank of cardinal on May 24, 1976. Throughout his tenure, Nsubuga demonstrated remarkable resilience, guiding the Catholic Church in Uganda through periods of political instability, civil unrest, and religious tension. For twenty-four years, he remained a steadfast spiritual leader, advocating for peace, justice, and human rights. He retired in 1990, leaving behind a legacy of faith, compassion, and service.[9] His retirement marked the end of an era defined by his unwavering commitment to faith, service, and the preservation of Uganda's Catholic heritage.

Despite his profound influence, scholarly engagement with Nsubuga's legacy remains limited, particularly compared to figures such as his predecessor, Archbishop Kiwanuka, known for his intellectual brilliance, or his martyred Anglican contemporary Janan Luwum.[10] Existing scholarship on Nsubuga, such as Carney's works and articles by Juliet Lukwago and Charles Kimbowa have largely focused on Nsubuga's role in guiding the Church during the tumultuous years of political oppression and civil war in the 1980s.[11] Carney in his absorbing and eloquent work, *Catholic Leadership in Modern Uganda*, highlights Nsubuga's adept use of both silence and speech to assert his pastoral authority and engage in political resistance during the 1970s and 1980s.[12] Known as a voice for the voiceless, Nsubuga is remembered by Catholics and peace-seeking Ugandans for his fearless opposition to oppression and human rights abuses. His enduring commitment to justice and morality in Uganda was encapsulated in his eulogy at Rubaga in 1976, which stated: 'The Cardinal frequently emphasized his responsibility to guide leaders in maintaining Uganda as a nation devoted to God, where peace and love would be experienced by all.'[13] Nsubuga's public statements consistently reflected his concern for the nation's well-being. This article departs

8 Biography is drawn from Stephen Mukasa, Charles Ssengendo, and Nkeera Joseph *The Late Emmanuel Cardinal Kiwanuka Nsubuga: 1914-1991* (Kisubi, Uganda: Marianum Press, 1991), 3-6. See also J.J Carney, 'Modern Roman Catholic Mission and the Legacy of Uganda's Emmanuel Cardinal Nsubuga,' *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 43, no. 2 (2019): 160.

9 Mukasa, Ssengendo, and Nkeera, *The Late Emmanuel Cardinal Kiwanuka Nsubuga,* 6.

10 Carney, Modern Roman Catholic Mission and the Legacy of Uganda's Emmanuel Cardinal Nsubuga, 46.

11 Ibid. See also Juliet Lukwago, 'Cardinal Nsubuga was a voice for the voiceless,' The New Vision, August 12, 2023, https://www.newvision.co.ug/category/celebrating-life/cardinal-nsubuga-was-the-voice-for-the-voicel-NV_167371; Charles M. Kimbowa, Emmanuel Cardinal Nsubuga Still Lives with us (Kisubi: Marianum Press, 2005); Robert Muggaga, 'Cardinal Nsubuga the Man of God Amin never touched,' The Monitor April 26, 2015, https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/magazines/people-power/cardinal-nsubuga-man-of-god-amin-never-touched-1608710.

12 J.J, Carney, *For God and My Country: Catholic Leadership in Modern Uganda* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), 42.

13 Mukasa, Ssengendo, and Nkeera, *The Late Emmanuel Cardinal Kiwanuka Nsubuga*, 6.

from and adds to the existing scholarship by examining Nsubuga's contributions to Uganda's Catholic religious heritage and devotional life through the establishment of sacred spaces that memorialised the Uganda Martyrs, honoured pioneering missionaries and embedded Catholic heritage within Uganda's public life.

Architect of Devotion: Building the Martyr's Shrine

Namugongo, once a dreaded execution ground in Buganda Kingdom, has over the years evolved into one of the most revered pilgrimage sites in Africa. In pre-colonial Buganda it served as a site where individuals deemed the worst criminals by the *kabaka* met their fate. However, its transformation into a sacred landmark began with the executions ordered by Kabaka Mwanga between January 31, 1885 and January 27, 1887. During this period, Mwanga, fearing the growing influence of Christianity among his pages and subjects, condemned twenty-two young Catholic palace attendants to death for refusing to renounce their faith (in addition to twenty-three Protestant followers and a few Muslims, though the latter are not commemorated by the Church). Historian D. A. Low argues that Mwanga viewed these Christian converts as political insurgents, conspiring with European colonial forces to undermine his authority. Their unwavering loyalty to a foreign faith and refusal to conform to Mwanga's authority were seen as destabilising factors against Buganda's unity.[14]

Supporting Low's perspective, Lwanga-Lunyiigo suggests that Mwanga did not necessarily despise Christianity, but rather saw its radical adherents as a subversive threat to the state. He notes that while Mwanga harboured a certain fondness for *abaana* (converts), he did not anticipate that their actions would be so subversive as to pose an existential threat to the state.[15] As a result, Mwanga ordered the execution of over forty-five Christian converts, targeting both Catholics and Protestants. These executions took place in various locations across the kingdom, but the most infamous site was Namugongo, where the largest group of converts met their gruesome deaths. Over time, what was once a place of brutal persecution transformed into a symbol of resilience, faith, and spiritual triumph, eventually evolving into a distinguished pilgrimage site.

The journey toward recognising Namugongo as a sacred space began with Joshua Serufasa Zaake who lived from 1884-1985. Serufasa Zaake, whose father had participated in the nineteenth-century religious wars, identified the site of the martyrs' execution and erected a small structure there to mark its significance.[16] The first major step towards formalizing Namugongo's religious importance came on June 6, 1920, during the beautification of the Uganda Martyrs in Rome. That same year, a young Dutch priest named Rev. Fr. Stephen Walters led a group of pilgrims to Namugongo. It was during this pilgrimage that Fr. Walters conceived the idea of acquiring land to construct a church to serve as a lasting memorial to the martyrs. This vision was materialized in 1935 with the construction of a modest rectangular chapel dedicated

14 D.A. Low, *Religion and Society in Buganda, 1875-1900* (Kampala, Uganda: East African Institute of Social Research, 1957), 7.

15 Samwiri Lwanga-Lunyiigo, *Mwanga II: Resistance to Imposition of British Colonial Rule in Buganda 1884-1899* (Wavah Books, 2011), 4.

16 Fr. Joseph Mukasa Muwonge, Interview with Anatoli Lwassampijja, Namugongo, January 17, 2022.

to St. Charles Lwanga on eight acres of acquired land.[17]

The most transformative chapter in Namugongo's history unfolded under the leadership of Cardinal Emmanuel Nsubuga. In 1967, he embarked on an ambitious project to construct a grand shrine worthy of the martyrs' legacy. Demonstrating remarkable personal commitment, Nsubuga embraced a hands-on approach. He relocated from Rubaga to Namugongo, living on-site in a tent and actively participating in the construction process. With immense dedication, he even engaged in the physical labour of clearing the site, wielding a panga to clear trees, demolish the existing mud-walled parish church, and remove debris and timber.[18] His efforts attracted widespread participation, with school children, clergy, nuns, and lay people joining him in the laborious task of building the shrine. Nsubuga's community-oriented approach reflected historical Catholic evangelization practices in Buganda, where local chiefs played a central role in building chapels and organizing religious instruction. This grassroots model of faith building, as noted by historian John Mary Waliggo, helped integrate Catholicism into the cultural fabric of Buganda.[19] The shrine's architectural design, inspired by the traditional African hut, further emphasized this fusion of faith and local identity. It features twenty-two copper pillars symbolizing the twenty-two Catholic martyrs, reinforcing the narrative of sacrifice and devotion.[20]

To finance the ambitious project, Cardinal Nsubuga launched a nationwide fundraising campaign on March 26, 1967 during a mass at Rubaga Cathedral. Using a raffia bag, known locally as *ekikapu*—which he had received from Naggalama Parish during a pastoral visit, he collected over 8,000 shillings on the first day alone. His fundraising efforts extended beyond Uganda, taking him to Rome and the United States alongside Msgr. Charles Kimbowa, Fr. Stephen Mukasa, and Fr. Yves Tourigny. While in Rome, he met Pope Paul VI, explaining the Namugongo project and requesting a blessing on the raffia bag. Pope Paul VI contributed 140,000 shillings, and in gratitude, Nsubuga invited him to lay the foundation stone and consecrate the altar at Namugongo.

Cardinal Nsubuga's dedication transformed Namugongo into a profound cultural and spiritual landmark. It was no longer just a place of remembrance; it became a living testament to Uganda's Christian heritage and the enduring power of faith. This recognition was further elevated in 1969 when Pope Paul VI visited Uganda and consecrated the altar at the shrine. The altar, erected on the exact spot where Saint Charles Lwanga was burned alive in 1886 became the focal point of pilgrimage and devotion. Namugongo has since grown into the largest pilgrimage destination in Eastern Africa, drawing thousands of faithful each year. These annual pilgrimages strengthen Catholic unity and reinforce the legacy of the Uganda Martyrs. Alison Bennet's concept of 'micro-material practices' underscores the significance of physical religious structures in nurturing faith; as such, Namugongo fulfils this role by offering worshipers a tangible connection to their spiritual history.[21]

17 Ibid.

18 Emmanuel Cardinal Nsubuga at Namugongo, (Uganda Catholic Information Bulletin) UCI No. 42/67, Rubaga Archives.

19 Waliggo, 'The Bugandan Christian Revolution: The Catholic Church in Buddu, 1879–1896, 2002, 79.

20 Fr. Joseph Mukasa Muwonge, Interview with Anatoli Lwassampijja, Namugongo, January 17, 2022. The martyrs' shrine was designed by a German Architect Dr. Danhinden and the construction was carried out by Roko Construction Company.

21 Bennett, 'Objects of Catholic Conversion in Colonial Buganda,' 28.

The shrine's status as a major religious landmark was further solidified when Pope John Paul II visited Namugongo on February 7, 1993, followed by Pope Francis on November 28, 2015. In recognition of its significance, the Vatican declared it a minor basilica, an honour reserved for churches associated with profound historical and spiritual events. Today, Namugongo stands not only as a beacon of Catholic devotion but also as a testament to Uganda's unique religious and cultural heritage, where history, faith, and architecture converge to tell the story of the martyrs' sacrifice and enduring legacy.

Repatriating Missionary Remains: Nsubuga's 1974 Legacy

On March 8, 1974, Archbishop Emmanuel Kiwanuka Nsubuga of Kampala convened a press conference at his Rubaga residence to address inquiries regarding the repatriation of the remains of Uganda's pioneering Catholic missionaries. Nsubuga underscored the paradox that while Ugandans had embraced Christianity with profound devotion, the very missionaries who had introduced the faith lay interred in distant lands, largely forgotten by the faithful they had served. He framed the repatriation within the context of African tradition concerning burial, posing a rhetorical question: 'Is it not a right and a duty for any of us Ugandans to see that the remains of our parents and relatives be buried in the very land where they lived?' He further emphasized, 'We all go through a lot of trouble to be faithful to this tradition.' Owing to this deeply ingrained cultural practice, he declared that, 'In the same way, since we consider the first five missionaries who came to Uganda as the fathers of Catholic faith, we consider it our right and duty to bring their remains back to the land for which they have died, with no other purpose than to honour their mission of spreading the message of Christ.'[22]

Motivated by this conviction, Cardinal Nsubuga undertook a concerted effort to retrieve and repatriate the remains of Uganda's early Catholic missionaries. His commitment to this endeavour earned him the affectionate title *Muzzukulu wa Bamisaani*, grandson of missionaries, reflecting his deep respect and gratitude for their contributions to Ugandan Christianity.[23] His initial efforts focused on repatriating the remains of Bishop Léon Livinhac and Fr. Gireault from Algiers, where they were buried. With the help of President Idi Amin, who facilitated contact with President Boumedienne of Algiers, Nsubuga successfully secured the return of their remains for reburial in Uganda.[24]

While historical narrative about the arrival of Catholicism in Uganda often emphasizes the roles of Father Siméon Lourdel (Mapeera) and Br. Amans, Nsubuga's repatriation efforts brought attention to the broader cohort of missionaries who played key roles in the early evangelization process. Inquiring why Cardinal Nsubuga went to great lengths to repatriate the remains of other missionaries, Fr. Richard Nyombi, clarified that the first White Fathers' caravan to Equatorial Africa in 1878 comprised ten missionaries, five of whom reached Kigungu, Entebbe in 1879. Among

22 Archbishop Nsubuga Answers the public queries,' UCI. No. 50/74 dated 8.3.74, Rubaga Archives. See also *The Voice of Uganda*, February 9, 1974.

23 Fr. Richard Nyombi, Interview with Anatoli Lwassampijja, Mapeera Nabulagala, Dec 20, 2021.

24 'Archbishop Nsubuga Answers the public queries,' UCI. No. 50/74 dated 8.3.74, Rubaga Archives. See also *The Voice of Uganda*, February 9, 1974.

them, Fr. Simeon Lourdel and Br. Amans were selected to meet Kabaka Mwanga, a factor that contributed significantly to their prominence in historical accounts.[25] Additionally, Fr. Nyombi noted that their mastery of local languages, specifically Luganda, facilitated their engagement with the local population thereby cementing their status as the most well-known figures among the pioneer Catholic missionaries. However, the group also included Fr. Leon Livinhac who was the group's leader, Fr. Gireault and Fr. Barbot whose roles, though crucial have often been overshadowed in historical accounts. Therefore, by repatriating their remains, Cardinal Nsubuga sought to rectify this historical imbalance, and ensure that the collective missionary effort was duly recognized within Uganda's Christian heritage.

In 1974, Archbishop Nsubuga extended his mission to Zanzibar and Algiers, seeking the remains of Fr. Barbot and Br. Amans.[26] Father Barbot, born in France in 1846, received his priestly education at the Major Seminary of Seez, Normandy before joining the Missionaries of Africa, the White Fathers, a society founded by the Archbishop, later Cardinal, Charles Lavigerie of Algiers. Barbot was among the first five missionaries dispatched to Uganda in 1879.[27] Fr. Barbot and Fr. Gireault were sent in 1880 to establish a new station south of Lake Victoria in what is now western Tanzania. Two years later, Fr. Barbot was reassigned to Zanzibar to open a 'procure,' but he succumbed to illness just a month after his arrival.[28]

Similarly, Brother Delmas Amans, born in France in 1852, joined the White Fathers in Algiers at the age of twenty-four and arrived in Uganda alongside Fr Lourdel on February 17, 1879.[29] He dedicated himself to missionary work in Rubaga and Buddu, serving in Uganda until 1895. After leaving Uganda, he fell ill and passed away in Bagamoyo.[30] Notably, of the first Catholic missionaries to Uganda, only Fr. Simon Lourdel (Mapeera), had been interred in Uganda. Initially, he was buried at Nabunya-Rubaga. His remains were later exhumed by Cardinal Nsubuga and temporarily kept in his private chapel at Rubaga before being transferred to St. John the Baptist Catholic Parish, Mapeera Nabulagala.

Cardinal Nsubuga meticulously navigated the bureaucratic and diplomatic hurdles necessary for the repatriation effort. On February 8, 1974, he met President Amin at Makindye Lodge to brief him on plans for retrieving the remains of Fr. Barbot and Br. Amans from Zanzibar and Bagamoyo, respectively. Despite Amin's Muslim background and ambition to promote Islam in Uganda, he supported Nsubuga's initiative, facilitating introductions to key officials in Tanzania and Algiers.[31] Following extensive diplomatic negotiations, Nsubuga travelled to Zanzibar and Algiers, securing the bone fragments of Fr. Barbort and Br. Amans for reinternment in Uganda.[32]

25 Fr. Richard Nyombi, interview with Anatoli Lwassampijja March, March 7, 2025, Lourdel House Nsambya.

26 'Remains of 2 Catholic missionaries returned to Uganda,' UCI No 48/74, dated March 8,1974, Rubaga Archives.

27 While Fr. Lourdel and Br. Amans are the most well-known among the first Catholic missionaries to Uganda particularly for their mastery of local languages, it is important to note that they arrived as part of a group of five, which also included Fr. Livinhac (who was their leader), Fr. Gireaut and Fr. Barbot.

28 Yves Touringy, *Ancestors in Faith; The Story of the first Catholic Martyrs in Uganda* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), 37. See also Yago Abeledo 'Who was brother Amans?' Missionaries of Africa, Jinja, April 1, 2015 https://mafr-jinja.blogspot.com/2015/04/who-was-brother-amans-delmas.html.

29 Ibid., 29.

30 'Remains of 2 Catholic missionaries returned to Uganda,' UCI No 48/74, March 8, 1974, Rubaga Archives.

31 Ibid.

32 See John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann 1969). Also see J. N. K. Mugambi *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi: Longman, 1989).

Additionally, Nsubuga embarked on a missionary journey and pilgrimage to France, the missionaries' birthplace, to venerate their origins, visit their baptismal sites, meet their relatives, and collect mementoes. He returned to Uganda on March 6, 1974 with the remains, receiving a momentous welcome from the Catholic faithful.

Nsubuga's repatriation efforts in 1974 had striking similarities to President Amin's earlier repatriation of Kabaka Edward Muteesa II's body from London in 1971. Just as Amin's gesture was seen as an attempt to heal historical wounds and garner political goodwill particularly among Baganda who deeply revered their late king, Nsubuga's initiative resonated with Ugandan Catholics, reinforcing their spiritual and cultural ties to the early missionaries. Besides, having witnessed the overwhelming support and affection he received after facilitating Muteesa's reburial at Kasubi, Amin may have recognized the political capital embedded in supporting Nsubuga's efforts. His support and involvement in the repatriation process could thus be interpreted as a strategic move to align himself with the Catholic Church, projecting himself as a leader who respected religious traditions and sought national unity.

When Cardinal Nsubuga returned with the remains, he was warmly received by prominent figures, including Rt. Rev. Adrian Ddungu of Masaka Diocese, and E. M. K. Muchope, Senior Assistant Secretary in the Department of Religious Affairs.[33] During a brief address at the airport's VIP lounge, Nsubuga emphasized the cultural significance of honouring the deceased, stating, 'Respect for our ancestors is one of the most cherished traditions in our culture, and our forbearers in the faith are as deeply loved as those in our own families.' This statement underscored his belief that the missionaries deserved a respectful burial akin to that of Ugandan ancestors. As such, Nsubuga's actions resonate with scholarly discussion on the interactions between pre-colonial beliefs and Christianity in Africa. Theologian John Mbiti, for instance, argues that African traditional religions and Christianity share commonalities in their rituals and symbols, suggesting that African Christianity can be seen as an evolution or extension of earlier spiritual frameworks.[34]

Cardinal Nsubuga's efforts to repatriate and re-inter the missionary remains exemplifies how Catholicism in Uganda has continually adapted to and integrated local cultural values. His initiative reinforced the veneration of early missionaries within Ugandan Catholic identity while also resonating with indigenous beliefs about honouring the dead. The repatriation also reflected broader scholarly discussion on material religious transformations and the role of relics in shaping post-colonial Christian identities. As Bennet has shown, objects, in this case, human remains, serve as a tangible connection between colonial and post-colonial Christian identities.[35] In this case, the return of the remains symbolised a reclaiming of Uganda's Christian history, blending reverence for missionary efforts with a distinct Ugandan legacy.

Despite the widespread support for the repatriation, it was not without controversy. Some Ugandans perceived it as a politically motivated manoeuvre, suggesting that Nsubuga sought to reintroduce colonial influences.[36] Uganda News

33 'Remains of 2 Catholic missionaries returned to Uganda,' UCI No 48/74, March 8, 1974, Rubaga Archives.

34 See Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy;* Mugambi *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity.*

35 Bennett, 'Objects of Catholic Conversion in Colonial Buganda.'

36 'Public' Queries the returning to Uganda of the remains of the first two catholic missionaries,' UCI No 49/74, 8th/3/1974, Rubaga Archive.

Agency (UNA) reported and published numerous inquiries on behalf of the public regarding the return of the remains of the first two missionaries to Uganda.[37] On March 8, 1974, *The Voice of Uganda* highlighted public scepticism regarding the manner of the remains' return. The use of two small boxes, reminiscent of ladies' handbags rather than traditional coffins, fuelled suspicions and echoed Libyan leader Colonel Muamar Gadhafi's assertion that 'Christianity was brought by imperialists in suitcases for political reasons.'[38] The public further questioned whether the archbishop was not playing political games and bringing back imperial agents.[39]

To counter this scepticism, Cardinal Nsubuga held a press conference on March 8, 1974 at his residence in Rubaga, Kampala, urging the public to seek information from the office of the permanent secretary of the department of religious affairs, a department created by Amin to control religious institutions. Nsubuga thus urged people to consult reliable sources for information and warned that those spreading falsehoods were 'acting against His Excellency President Amin's own intention by dividing the people on religious issues while since the religious meeting of Kabale 1971, President does his best to unite us all in peace and harmony.'[40] Nsubuga emphasized that the repatriation was purely an act of reverence, devoid of political motives, and reiterated the missionaries' role in spreading Catholicism as meriting dignified commemoration.

Addressing criticism about the transportation of the remains in small Zanzibar chests, Nsubuga explained that this choice was dictated by the state of decomposition of the remains. He clarified that 'Any medical authority will agree that the remains of human beings, after such a long time...go through a quasi-total decomposition, so one can only find parts of the skull and pieces of the upper arm and upper leg bones.'[41] He further defended the use of Zanzibar chests as appropriate and symbolically significant, for it avoided any misrepresentation of remains as intact bodies. Nsubuga further likened his actions to Ugandan traditional practices, invoking the example of Ssekabaka Kintu, an ancestral king whose remains were preserved in a *lutiba,* or small container. This comparison reinforced the notion that his approach aligned with longstanding Ugandan customs.

Ultimately, by orchestrating the repatriation and reinternment of these missionary remains, Cardinal Nsubuga bridged Catholic rites with Ugandan cultural values, demonstrating that the Catholic church could honour and preserve Uganda's past in a manner deeply resonant with local traditions. His efforts reinforced a unique Catholic identity, positioning the early Catholic missionaries as integral figures in Uganda's spiritual ancestry.

Preserving Nalukolongo's Monumental Legacy

Nalukolongo occupies a central place in the history of Catholicism in Uganda, serving as an early site of evangelisation and a witness to key developments in the Church's expansion. The site's significance dates back to 1884, when Kabaka Mwanga,

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Public' Queries the returning to Uganda of the remains of the first two catholic missionaries, UCI No 49/74, March 8, 1974, Rubaga Archive.
41 Cardinal Nsubuga responds to public queries, UCI No 49/74, March 8, 1973, Rubaga Archive.

successor to Muteesa, invited Catholic missionaries to return to Buganda. This decision, influenced by the request of Joseph Balikuddembe, one of Mwanga's court pages who was enrolled as a catechumen along with Andrew Kaggwa, marked a critical moment in the reestablishment of Catholic presence in the kingdom. Responding to Mwanga's invitation, Fr. Siméon Lourdel and Br. Delmas Amans, accompanied by Fr. Pierre Girraud, returned to Uganda on July 13, 1885 and established a new mission station at Nalukolongo. This site soon became the first cathedral in Uganda under Bishop Léon Livinhac, serving as a strategic centre for missionary activity. This location provided access to the broader community, facilitating evangelisation efforts.[42] However, despite the initial goodwill from Mwanga, relations quickly deteriorated, posing a significant challenge to the missionaries.

Beyond its role as an early missionary base, Nalukolongo was instrumental in fostering indigenous religious vocations. It was here that Maria Mathilda Munaku and Celestine Namusanga made private vows of celibacy before Fr. Lourdel, pledging themselves to the service of the Catholic Church and the needy. Lourdel would later describe Celestine as the first Black African brother and Mathilda as the first Black African sister, or nun. Celestine who was ransomed in 1885, and baptised later that year, took his temporary vow for one year in 1887, but tragically drowned in Lake Victoria while fleeing Buganda in October 1888 after the missionaries were expelled by the Muslim-led forces of Kabaka Kalema. Mathilda, the sister to Saint Noa Mawaggali, was baptised in July 1886, took her temporary vows the same year, and dedicated her life to serving the Church in various mission posts and seminaries until she died in 1934 at the age of seventy-six. She was laid to rest at Bukalasa Seminary Cemetery.[43]

Nalukolongo was also the site of significant baptisms, including those of ten future martyrs: Charles Lwanga, James Buzzabalyawo, Bruno Sserunkuma, Dennis Ssebugwawo, Athanasius Bazekuketta, Gonzaga Gonza, Ambrose Kibuuka, Anatole Kirigwajjo, Achilles Kiwanuka, and Adolf Mukasa Ludigo.[44] It was also at this site that the first baptisms of Ugandan women were administered directly by the missionaries. Despite the increasing hostility toward Christians in the final years of Mwanga's reign, the mission at Nalukolongo remained a bastion of faith. However, in October, 1888, Muslim supporters of Kabaka Kalema imprisoned and expelled the missionaries, looted and destroyed the mission, and forced its abandonment. When the Catholic missionaries returned to Buganda, they found Nalukolongo in ruins, rendering it unsuitable for reoccupation.

Inspired by the sacrifices, struggles and perseverance of the early missionaries, Cardinal Nsubuga spearheaded efforts to preserve Nalukolongo as a sacred historical site. Viewing the missionaries' legacy as integral to Uganda's Catholic identity, he sought not only to commemorate their contributions but also to strengthen the Catholic Church's role in social and spiritual life. His preservation efforts transformed Nalukolongo into a vital centre of worship and Christian charity. As Waliggo observes, early Ugandan Catholics faced considerable limitations, with scarce access to priests, churches, and liturgical objects. Devotional spaces such as Nalukolongo thus became

42 Yves Tourigny, *So Abundant a Harvest, 1879-1979*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979) 34-46.

43 Vitus Danaa Abobo, 'Missionaries of Africa 150th Jubilee pilgrimage,' https://mafrome.org/150th-pilgrimage-day-1-nalukolongo/, accessed November 24, 2025.

44 Ibid.

essential in sustaining and nurturing their faith.[45]

Beyond its spiritual significance, Nalukolongo also served as a refuge for the vulnerable. Many young enslaved boys and girls, as well as other marginalized individuals were ransomed and cared for there. Recognizing this legacy, Cardinal Nsubuga founded the institute of the Good Samaritan Sisters in 1976 and two years later, in 1978, he established the Mapeera Bakateyamba Home at Nalukolongo, which is dedicated to providing shelter for the elderly, disabled, and needy. Initially accommodating only ten disabled individuals, the home expanded significantly under Cardinal Nsubuga's leadership. His commitment extended beyond providing material provisions; he personally volunteered at the home every Friday and oversaw the construction of a hostel designed to house up to three hundred people. In one of his addresses to the faithful, Nsubuga proclaimed: 'I have abolished the saying that charity ended with Mapeera! Let mercy not die with Mapeera but continue being seen through the charitable works of these girls towards the poor and destitute who will be brought here at Nalukolongo.'[46]

Nsubuga's emphasis on charity took on a heightened significance within Uganda's fraught political climate. In February 1977, Anglican Archbishop Janani Luwum was murdered, highlighting the dangers faced by religious leaders who confronted the state. Against this background, Nsubuga's turn to charitable work may be interpreted as both a moral commitment and a strategic move to navigate an increasingly repressive regime. At a time when direct political dissent was perilous, acts of charity provided a means for the Catholic Church in Uganda to maintain its influence while avoiding direct confrontation with the State.

In a final act of commemoration, Cardinal Nsubuga chose to be buried at Nalukolongo, breaking with the Church's tradition of burying bishops in cathedral crypts. In his last will, read by Bishop Mathias Ssekamanya to the council of bishops, Nsubuga explicitly expressed his desire to be laid to rest at Nalukolongo, one-mile down Rubaga Hill, next to the home for the disabled and the Good Samaritan Sisters. This decision initially raised concerns among church leaders, some of whom questioned how 'a prince of the Church being buried in a banana plantation' might be perceived. To resolve the matter, the bishops consulted Catholic Church authorities in Rome, who ultimately endorsed Nsubuga's choice. Rome's ruling stated: 'Whereas it is a privilege of Cardinals and Bishops to be buried in their cathedrals, the code of canon law does not impose it. Since, as you say, Cardinal Nsubuga made his last will in his full sense, it is difficult to find a suitable argument to change the will. However, if you deem it feasible and to be understood by the people of Uganda, the sacred congregation suggests that the funeral mass be celebrated in the cathedral for the sake of the proper protocol of government dignitaries. Then you can proceed to the place of Nsubuga's Choice for burial.'[47]

Today, Cardinal Nsubuga's grave is located behind the sacristy of the chapel at Nalukolongo, a structure built in 1924 to honour the Uganda Martyrs and

45 Waliggo, 'The Bugandan Christian Revolution: The Catholic Church in Buddu, 1879-1896,' 86.

46 Abobo, 'Missionaries of Africa 150th Jubilee pilgrimage.'

47 Excerpt of the will shared by Fr. Richard Nyombi, Mafr, during an interview with Lwassa Anatoli at Mapeera Nabulagala Parish, July 18th, 2021. For his writing, see Richard Nyombi, *Emmanuel Kalidinaali K. Nsubuga (1914-1991) Muzukulu Wa Bamisani Abasaale* (Kampala, Angel Agencies Limited: nd).

commemorate Msgr. Lavinhac and Fr. Lourdel. Through this decision, Nsubuga sought to convey a powerful message, challenging societal perceptions of dignity and affirming the worth of the poor. As Sister Mary Lawrence Nakiwu, the administrator of the home, explained Cardinal Nsubuga's motivation, 'The Cardinal wanted to be buried at Nalukolongo to ensure that people would not forget about the poor.'[48] In other words, Cardinal Nsubuga envisioned Nalukolongo as a permanent reminder of society's moral obligation to the marginalised and the impoverished. When Catholics visit Nalukolongo for prayers, they also contribute donations to support the Good Samaritan Sisters' charitable work. Nsubuga's vision and legacy thus persist through both spiritual devotion and tangible acts of charity.

Central to Nsubuga's ministry was the conviction that every individual holds inherent worth in the eyes of God. This belief explains his deep concern for the marginalized – the poor, the sick, the elderly, non-believers, and even those deemed sinners. As recounted by Fr. Joseph Nkeera and Fr. Charles Ssengendo, people who were close to him, 'these groups held a special place in his heart and preoccupied his time and thoughts.'[49] His profound empathy enabled him to connect with human suffering, anxieties, and fears, fostering a ministry rooted in compassion and dedication to addressing the complex challenges faced by society's most vulnerable.

Nsubuga's vision of social justice and charity continues to shape Nalukolongo's identity. During his visit to Uganda in 2015, Pope Francis highlighted this legacy, making a special stop at Nalukolongo's Home of Charity. [50] In his address, he remarked: 'This is a place which had always been associated with the Church's outreach to the poor, the handicapped and the sick. Here, in early times, slave children were ransomed and women received religious instruction from the missionaries for the time... Today from this Home, I appeal to all parishes and communities in Uganda and the rest of Africa not to forget the poor.'[51]

From Pope Francis commentary at Nalukolongo, it can be observed that at its core, Cardinal Nsubuga's dedication to what Carney describes as a 'preferential option for the poor' ensured that Nalukolongo was not only preserved as a cherished historical site but transformed into a living testament to Catholic social teachings.[52] Today, pilgrims who visit Nalukolongo continue his legacy, by actively engaging in acts of charity, reinforcing the Catholic Church in Uganda's enduring commitment to social justice.

Conclusion

Cardinal Emmanuel Nsubuga's legacy extends beyond his well-documented pastoral role in guiding Uganda through the political and social upheavals of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. This article has examined a less-explored aspect of his

48 Sister Mary Lawrence Nakiwu, Interview with Anatoli Lwassampijja January 28, 2022, Nalukolongo, 2.

49 Mukasa, Ssengendo and Nkeera, *The Late Emmanuel Cardinal Kiwanuka Nsubuga*, 14.

50 Mapeera Bakateyamba's home at Nalukolongo would later host Pope Francis at 5:00 pm on Saturday, November 29, 2015.

51 Pope Francis, 'Visit to the House of Charity of Nalukolongo,' Address at Kampala, Uganda, November 28, 2015, in Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Kenya, Uganda and the Central African Republic (25-30 November 2015), Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151128_uganda-casa-carita.pdf.

52 J.J Carney, *For God and My Country: Catholic Leadership in Modern Uganda* (Eugene: Cascade Press, 2020).

contributions: his efforts in creating and preserving Catholic sacred spaces that not only reinforced the historical presence of Catholicism but also cemented its place in Uganda's public life. Through initiatives such as the construction of Namugongo Martyrs Shrine, the repatriation of missionaries' remains, and the preservation of Nalukolongo, one of the earliest Catholic preaching sites, Nsubuga established enduring religious landmarks that continue to shape Uganda's spiritual landscape. By championing the development of Namugongo and honouring the legacy of early missionaries, Nsubuga curated a distinctly Ugandan expression of Catholicism – one that blends Catholic faith with indigenous heritage to create a unique religious hybridity. His initiatives provided a tangible manifestation of faith, memorialising the Uganda Martyrs, honouring pioneering missionaries and promoting Christian charity as a core value of the Catholic Church in Uganda.

The enduring impact of Nsubuga's efforts is evident in the continued vibrancy of Catholic devotion in Uganda. The non-segregational caregiving at Nalukolongo exemplifies his commitment to social justice, while the annual June 3rd Martyrs Day celebration at Namugongo draws thousands of pilgrims from across the world, underscoring the global significance of Uganda's Catholic heritage. Through his vision, Nsubuga ensured that these sacred spaces remained not only historical markers but also living testimonies of faith, service, and resilience. His legacy continues to shape the collective identity of Catholics in Uganda and beyond, reinforcing the role of religious heritage in sustaining both spiritual and communal life.

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