

Review

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Student Power in Africa's Higher Education: A Case of Makerere University.
by Frederick K. Byaruhanga. New York and London: Routledge, 2006.

This book recounts the history of student activism at Makerere University in Uganda by tracing the chronology of various critical incidents that occurred between 1950 and 2005, tracing their immediate and remote causes, and changing national and institutional contexts. The book also questions the role of the Ugandan government and university administration in fomenting and quelling this activism, examining the strategies they employed to manage students, and the institutional changes that have taken place at the university in response to these crises.

Byaruhanga is particularly interested in the motivations and perspectives of students at Makerere University, and to this end interviews and extensively cites former student activists, many of whom are now in the national government. He takes into account students' historical positions both as agents of social transformation and victims of the repressive Ugandan state operating in the context of multiple crises. He also charts the internal forces that have propelled student agitation over time, including the politics of pan-African identity, self-interest, and the various forms of social experimentation and social obligation students have sought to assume.

Starting from the dying days of the colonial enterprise in Uganda, Byaruhanga's detailed work describes and analyses the progressive disempowerment of students in the national political, economic and social spheres. He shows how student activism at Makerere began with largely apolitical protests in 1952 about the quality of food at the university, but were soon influenced and politicised by broader anti-colonial and pan-African struggles taking place on the continent in the 1960s. He describes, in the 1970s, a turn in student protests to focusing on internal, national politics, responding to the rise of the repressive Idi Amin regime in 1971. In 1976, for instance, a cohort of Makerere students planned a rebellion that would lead to the ousting of Amin. Their efforts were unsuccessful and led to the arrest and torture of student leaders. The deployment of soldiers on campus led to the rape of a number of female students. Byaruhanga argues that the will of these students to overthrow the national government and thereby

contribute to the future direction of the state reflected their sense of their “elite status as the conscience of the nation” (76).

There is an incipient crisis in African higher education, beginning in the 1980s and continuing to this day. Byaruhanga alleges that one consequence of this has been the de-ideologisation of student activism at Makerere. The protracted crisis in African higher education is symptomatic and part of the broader social crises following two decades of structural adjustment in Africa. It has been characterised by diminishing state funding for education in the face of rapidly growing enrolment rates, a massive brain drain and overstretching of facilities. Byaruhanga argues that student protest, responses and “tactics” at the university are now driven by the quest of students to survive and reclaim lost ground. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw protests around escalating tuition and user fees imposed by the national government upon students, for example.

Byaruhanga explains that student resistance at Makerere has met with increased state repression since the era of Idi Amin, often with the connivance of university authorities. Efforts to crush student movements have led to deaths, imprisonments and expulsions. At the same time, the author notes and problematises the tendency for student protests, in some instances, to assume rather violent forms, leading to the destruction of university and private property and sometimes, unfortunately, the loss of life. The interface of student versus state power is explored in the book, though I would have welcomed more detail on the tactics deployed by both the state and the university administration as they sought to infiltrate and subvert student politics.

Byaruhanga does not present Makerere students as an undifferentiated whole in his book. Quite the contrary: he traces the political cleavages and the contradictions that emerged within student organizations, even as they sought to contest the university and the state. The engagement of students with national politics is seen to be a reaction to the broader power struggles taking place in the body politic, and an articulation of students’ self-interest in the face of economic stagnation, pauperisation and rising graduate unemployment. This is so because Byaruhanga contends that from the 1980s onwards, certain student leaders were directly connected to the ruling party, and could even attribute their dominance to their interference of the party in student politics.

Where the author’s analysis of the internal differentiation of student politics is notably silent, however, is in terms of gender. In fact, Byaruhanga does not explore the gender dimensions of the history of student activism at Makerere, and only cites the words and experiences of a few women activists. The reader

is left to wonder if women participated in student movements at all, given the evidence that they are likely to be even more affected than their male counterparts by poverty and unemployment, the issues which increasingly led students to manifest their discontent. At the end of the book, the author discusses this omission, and proposes a gendered analysis of student activism at Makerere as a possible extension of his work. However, he does not explain why he did not incorporate gender as a salient category of his analysis.

Methodologically, the book draws on a good combination of interviews and individual case histories that showcase students' personal experiences. Together, these methods enable the author to come up with interesting and original analyses. However, there is a paucity of documentary evidence in the work. There is very little reference to any of the primary documents that underpin economic and educational policies and regulations as they have affected students and the university. Similarly, little effort is devoted to reflecting on the role(s) of other stakeholders (local, national, regional and global) in the educational sector, and the ways these may affect student politics.

Byaruhanga does not sufficiently examine student activism at Makerere in relation to the challenges posed by globalisation, nor does he delve into the relationship between these challenges and those national politics and policies affecting higher education.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, Byaruhanga provides a clear and interesting history of student politics in Uganda. This book is bound to be of interest to researchers in African higher education. Social scientists and historians, scholars and policy-makers in the fields of education, human development and development may also want to consider Byaruhanga's analysis and policy prescriptions, as these are relevant to the challenges confronting higher education in most parts of Africa today. Bringing a historical perspective to bear on the matter, the book complements the growing literature on this theme.

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