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Schools of free thought

How humanism found a foothold in Uganda, one of the most Christian countries on the planet

By Amy Fallon

When Peter Kisirinya laid down the first handmade brick of a high school classroom in 2005, surrounded by his community in Kateera, Uganda, he didn't have any inkling of how ground-breaking it was. "I had no sense that I was starting the first of anything in the world," said the founder and managing director of the Isaac Newton Humanist High School, believed to be the first and longest-running institution of its kind in Africa.

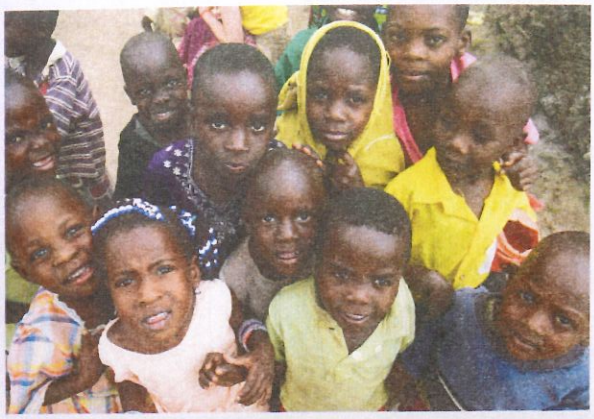
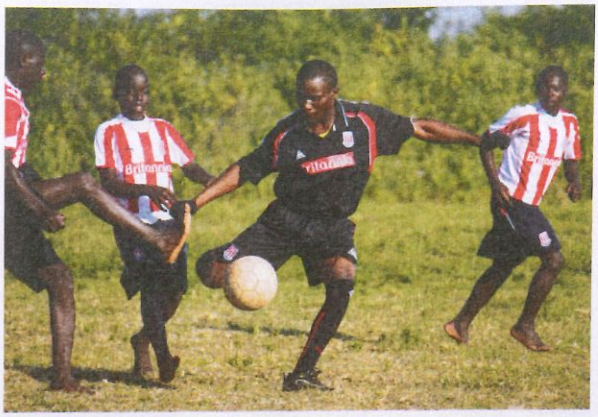
Kateera is a sleepy town in central Uganda. There was a backlash against the school at first. Kisirinya said that some clerics "told the community that we were recruiting students for homosexuality, and we were atheists who do not have culture and therefore there is no way we could have discipline." But despite these challenges, Kisirinya persevered. Since then, four schools have been set up. Over 1,000 students have been educated at the high school and the primary school, also named after the famous English mathematician. The schools teach the Ugandan state curriculum, so students must study religion. But they are also taught to be open-minded and questioning and are introduced to secular humanist values.

The schools are a remarkable achievement. Uganda is one of the most Christian countries on the planet. While secular according to its constitution, Uganda's motto is "for God and my country" and religion and superstition are still dominant forces in society. Religious institutions influence not just people's day-to-day lives but the country's politics. The Inter-Religious Council of Uganda, for example, organise their own presidential debates during national elections. Along with 31 other African countries, Uganda has a ban on same-sex relationships.

In May, they went one step further, passing legislation that includes the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality", which includes same-sex relations involving people deemed by the state to be "vulnerable". Engaging in any gay sex could land you in prison for life.

However, the country also hosts a nascent humanist movement. There are more than 3,000 humanists in Uganda, according to a recent study carried out by the Uganda Humanist Association, and the wider movement is helping others to escape the grip of religious doctrine. Today, there are at least 32 humanist networks and 16 schools across the country.

When it comes to a growing humanist movement "there's no country in Africa beating Uganda", activist Kato

Pupils study and play at Uganda's humanist schools

ANDREW WEST

Mukasa told me. A Ugandan himself, he co-founded The Humanist Association for Leadership, Equity and Accountability in 2007 and was also the first black person to be elected to the board of Humanists International. He has penned a string of books, including *The Bitter Pill: Unlearning the Myths about Homosexuality*, and works with several LGBT groups in the country. He said there are new projects popping up in every corner of Uganda.

But making progress can be tough. Uganda effectively has a "morality police," Mukasa said. "We have seen a moralistic parliament passing laws that gag individuals from exercising their freedom of expression, what to write or say on social media, who to love and how to love them." Meanwhile, "prophets" like Elvis Mbonye – a popular Pentecostal pastor worth an estimated $115 million – have managed to attract followers from the educated middle class, including MPs, doctors, university professors and human rights activists, "successfully blindfolding thousands of people". While there has never been such a strong humanist movement, there is also a great need for more to be done.

Why has Uganda become a centre for humanism in Africa, despite the challenges it faces on all sides? The movement got an initial boost with the founding of the Uganda Humanist Association in the mid-90s. It helps its member organisations to promote humanism in Uganda and beyond. But what provided that initial spark?

Kisirinya is one of the founders of the association. He says he felt the damaging impact of religious oppression from a young age. He attended a Catholic boarding school where students were forced to attend mass regularly and "could not mention our own thinking, [as this would] risk expulsion". He and some of his fellow students were introduced to humanism by his biology teacher. "We were excited to have the opportunity to pose questions that would not have been accepted in our previous classes," he said. Kisirinya went on to study physics, chemistry and education at Makerere University in Kampala, the capital of Uganda – the first child from his district to attend university.

There, he met Deo Ssekitoleko, a man who would prove to be a cornerstone of the Ugandan humanist movement. Ssekitoleko grew up a "staunch Catholic" in a poor family. He was disturbed by the corporal punishment he witnessed at school. (Later, he helped wage a successful campaign to ban the practice – although many teachers still

flout it.) Again, it was a biology teacher who helped the young Ssekitoleko see a different perspective, outside of religious indoctrination. He has previously described how the teacher "made an explosion in my brain and changed my ideological worldview". At university, he became a "radical secular humanist".

Ssekitoleko wanted to share this freedom with others. Together, he and Kisirinya introduced another friend of theirs, Moses Kamya, to humanism. Moses had been headed to join the Catholic seminary, but his thinking took a turn which would change his life for ever. The three friends would go on to create the Uganda Humanist Association, while Kisirinya would also found the Isaac Newton Humanist High School and become chair of the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust (UHST), a charity that provides support to schools set up by Ugandan humanists in poor rural areas.

Mukasa regards this meeting of minds as pivotal to the movement. "They saw a need to get organised, which countries like Nigeria didn't see," he said. There were "very few people at the time declaring that they were an atheist," he added. "But today if you look at our social media pages, you would be surprised at the number of people who do."

Everyone was offering religious or spiritual cures

When Mariam Nasejje attended an Islamic school in Uganda as a teenager, they would "beat you if you missed prayers". When Nasejje – whose father is Muslim and whose mother is Christian – became sick with the inflammatory disease Lupus, everyone around her was offering religious or spiritual cures. "There was the praying, the herbs, the witchcraft, anything you can imagine," she said. None of it worked, and Nasejje turned to science.

Today, Nasejje's Lupus is in remission. She is also a trained humanist celebrant – although she is not yet able to conduct ceremonies. So far, the only place where you can have a legal humanist wedding on the continent is South Africa. However, in 2019, the African Humanist Celebrants Network, a non-profit based in Uganda, began training celebrants online and organising mock humanist weddings, in preparation for the time when they might be allowed. The network has trained at least 44 celebrants – including bankers, entrepreneurs and accountants from nine African countries. They take lessons over the weekends via Zoom. "Training celebrants gives a sense of togetherness," said Nasejje. "Slowly change will happen, but only if we support and empower humanists just as much as other faiths do."

Nasejje started a foundation to help other people with Lupus in May 2002, which attracted some support. But in September 2021 several financial backers pulled out, because they were so worried about being associated with humanism. "They dumped us," said Nasejje. "Unfortunately, in this country, we are not very accepting of new things, so you live your life really, really under wraps."

These funding challenges are part of what makes global support so important. For example, the Rationalist Association, which publishes *New Humanist*, has provided financial support to humanist schools in Uganda, working alongside other humanist organisations in Britain and UHST. Humanists International has funded Freedom-Centre Uganda, a grassroots organisation in the south, to deliver human-rights-based training sessions. Progress is being made, but patience and determination are required.

Good schooling can help all members of a community, not only the students. For example, in 2016, UHST helped a community to recover from disaster. Roughly 100 young men from Katumba village, near the Congo border, died after following a witch doctor in a local rebellion. He had given the group a "potion" and told them it would stop the bullets when they attacked an army post.

Those who survived the rebellion helped the widows of the men who had died, many of them mothers, to build a school for their children. Local teachers were recruited, but the school was still struggling to provide enough classes. After visiting the school in 2018, a UHST trustee, who does not wish to be named, donated most of the funds to build them a new primary school.

Humanist schools take all kinds of students, not only non-religious ones. "They are inclusive and welcome children from all belief backgrounds," said UHST chair Steve Hurd, who is British but taught in Uganda with his wife in the early seventies. Besides being welcoming, he said, the schools are also very supportive of their female students, meeting practical needs such as for safe dormitory accommodation and sanitary products, as well as "opportunities for girls to play leadership roles".

"Children who passed through the humanist schools are doing well in life," said Hurd. "More go to further and higher education each year." Some are working in teaching and health care, while one former student works as a nutritionist in a refugee camp in northern Uganda. Another is the head of the local criminal investigations department, while yet another is doing a PhD in Australia.

Hurd added that many former students who leave Uganda for university later return to the schools, wishing to put something back into their communities and to "play their part in cementing the schools' humanist ethos."

Robert Bwambale grew up an orphan and was raised by many different families in Anglican, Seventh Day Adventist and Muslim homes that practised both monogamy and polygamy. He said this "exposed him to different cultures". "I became sceptical of religion in the early years of my secondary school – I was curious, asking myself a lot of questions," he said. "I visited different places of worship in search of truth, but from my questions to religious leaders and other people about life, I realised one was offering better answers with evidence." By the time he graduated with a diploma in biological sciences from Kyambogo University, Bwambale had lost his faith.

In 2009, Bwambale set up the Kasese United Humanist Association in western Uganda. Today it has three campuses, with a primary school consisting of 300 students, and a secondary college with 378 pupils. They also teach the Ugandan curriculum but adhere to the American Humanist Association Center's "Ten Commitments". These encompass the basic tenets of empathy, critical thinking and altruism, as well as service, participation and environmentalism. Children are taught gardening, for example, and how to raise free-range chickens. In contrast to Ugandan state schools, the students also learn sex education.

In contrast to state schools, students learn sex education

One of the students, Michael Thembo, aged about 13, said, "What I like about this school is we learn things and they can show us practically and we can understand very fast." Thembo lives with his mother, a farmer. "I would like to be an international judge," he said.

Bwambale has ambitious aims for all of his students. He hopes that his schools might be educating the "next Greta Thunberg". He adds, however, that the schools have "of course faced some challenges", because "religious folk like bishops, pastors and conservative religious zealots spread smear campaigns that I am a devil worshipper, a satanic ritualist. . . But over the years their allegations have been proven wrong."

Kato Mukasa hopes that the Covid-19 pandemic may have also helped to accelerate progress, as it encouraged the Ugandan population to question the knowledge of religious clerics. The "prophet" Elvis Mbonye, for instance, was investigated by police in 2019, at the height of the pandemic, over Facebook posts that allegedly spread misinformation regarding mass immunisations for measles, polio and rubella. The allegations were eventually scrapped, but his reputation was damaged.

"We have been telling the pastors to heal Covid-19 patients if they can – we have mocked them, we have ridiculed them," said Mukasa. "We have shown how useless they are with their miracle messages and preaching, and this has empowered us." He said that the lockdowns in Uganda also helped to lift the stranglehold of the church, as services moved online. "Knowing that God doesn't stay in buildings is a great awakening itself," he said, "because now people know that the pastor is not everything."

But leading humanist thinkers and activists are still taking a serious risk in a hostile environment, and this danger has only increased with the passing of the latest anti-LGBT legislation.

Mukasa acknowledges the personal cost. "My work has brought me enemies as I was accused of promoting homosexuality, prostitution, abortion, atheism and immorality," he said. Since 2014, his organisation's offices have been broken into and vandalised at least seven times. He's also had his home attacked, while his car was burnt and threatening notes left on the vehicle. "I have been accused of promoting western values and working with foreign agents to undermine the ruling party and the president of Uganda," he said. "On each occasion, we have reported the incidents to police but nothing has been done."

Dr Leo Igwe, chair of the board of trustees for the Humanist Association of Nigeria, says that the success of the movement in Uganda is giving them all inspiration. He met and admired Ssekitoleko, whose death in 2018 was a blow to the movement in Africa. But still he has hope. "Uganda, unlike Nigeria, has a number of secular and humanist-oriented schools, that promote critical thinking and scientific inquiry. . . These schools have a potential of becoming a beacon of light and hope", he said. "This is what the trend in Uganda suggests – that society will be more tolerant and progressive if the school system is driven by science, reason and other secular values."

Nasejje believes that the change in Uganda is only just beginning. But progress will be tough, with its roots in education. "Expecting change right now might be a bit hard, even in the next five years. I have friends who are very well-read, travelled and educated, but they are still so closed-minded," she said. "So, to see change we need to start with younger, fresher minds that are not yet biased." •