

2018-01

The contribution of Daniel William Alexander to the birth and growth of Eastern Orthodoxy in East Africa

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/50858>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

The Contribution of Daniel William Alexander to the Birth and Growth of Eastern Orthodoxy in East Africa

Eastern Christianity has existed in Africa since the first century. Many centuries later, the Orthodox Church was implanted in certain sub-Saharan African countries through the agency of Eastern Orthodox immigrants from Europe and Russia. East Africa owes its vibrant Orthodox Christianity to the early twentieth century Afro-American liberation movement led by Marcus Garvey. The leaders of the religious branch of the movement were Patriarch George Alexander McGuire and South African Archbishop (later Patriarch) Daniel William Alexander, both of the African Orthodox Church. These two men collaborated with two leading East Africans who became Greek Orthodox bishops in 1973: Ugandan Christophorous Spartas Sebbanja Mukasa of Nilopolis (1899-1982) and Kenyan George Arthur Gatungu Gathuna of Nitria (1905-1987). Along with Archimandrite Fr. Obadiah Kabanda Basajjakitalo (1896-1985) of Uganda, these men (who were priests at the time) joined the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa in 1942 with the help of Archimandrite Fr. Nicodemos Sarikas, a Greek priest from Asia Minor who was serving in Arusha, Tanzania at the time.

Eastern Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa

The earliest account of Eastern Christianity in Africa is the biblical story of the Ethiopian Eunuch who was baptized by Philip. Another instance is the formation and development of the ancient Alexandrian See of Saint Mark the Evangelist.¹ Between the first and fourth centuries, North African Christianity produced some of the greatest Christian scholars of all times.² However, there is no evidence that this revered North African Christianity ever traveled beyond Ethiopia into Sub-Saharan Africa for the first 1500 years of Christianity.³ In the early 1500s, Portuguese explorers were the first to bring the Western tradition of Roman Catholicism into Central Africa.⁴

¹ John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History*, 2nd ed. (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2009), 1-39; John Mbiti, "The Future of Christianity in Africa (1970-2000)," *Communio Viatorum* 1:2 (1970), 19.

² John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: The Church AD 450-680* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 272.

³ Baur, 20.

⁴ Baur, 40-98.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity came to Central and Southern Africa with immigrant merchants. The first was a Greek Cypriot named George Orfanides who arrived in Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) in 1880, while others settled in Beira, Mozambique in 1890.⁵ However, historical evidence along the coast of East Africa in the 1700s describes clergymen similar to Eastern Orthodox priests who had probably come with Arabic traders from the Middle East, the birthplace of Eastern Christianity.⁶ The Orthodox Christian immigrants in Africa later invited priests from their countries to come and serve them. These priests mainly served the immigrant population and did not extend Orthodoxy to the locals. However, a few priests went out of their way to propagate the faith to the locals—at first only to Africans working for Orthodox immigrants or in the church compound and later to their families and friends.

Eastern Orthodoxy in Uganda

For many years, Reuben Sebbanja Ssedimba Mukasa Spartas and his fellow military comrade and brother in law Obadiah Kabanda Basajjakitalo had wanted to leave the Anglican Church in Uganda because of its discriminatory practices towards Africans. Spartas came across the *Negro World Journal* and wrote to the Afro-American Garvey Movement religious leader Patriarch McGuire in April 1925, telling him of their desire to learn and teach scripture in an African led church. However, Spartas only received a response in 1928 when McGuire connected him with the newly consecrated Archbishop Alexander of South Africa.⁷

Alexander arrived in Uganda in August 1931 to serve the Ugandan led church that already had 1,512 members.⁸ In March 1932, Alexander consecrated one sister/nun, one reader (Mr. Erisa Sebbowa), and three deacons (Daudi Jube, Yosia Mukasa and Simeon Pasha). He also ordained both Spartas and Obadiah

⁵ Archbishop Makarios Tillyrides, *Year Book and Review* (Nairobi: Orthodox Archbishopric of Nairobi, 2016), 47; John Cosmas Ngige, “Theological Training and Formation in the Eastern Orthodox Churches in Africa,” in Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner (eds.), *Handbook of Theological Education in Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2013), 292.

⁶ Beck Sanderson, *MidEast and Africa 1700-1950 of Civilization* (World Peace Communication, 2010); Robert Maxon, *East Africa: An Introductory History*, 3rd ed. (Morgantown, VA: West Virginia University Press, 2009).

⁷ F. B. Welbourn, *East African Rebels* (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd, 1961), 81.

⁸ Welbourn, 87.

to the priesthood on Pentecost Sunday of 1932 at the cathedral of Villa Jerusalem in Degeya.⁹ Archpriest Spartas was made vicar general of the Ugandan Diocese.

Eastern Orthodoxy in Kenya

The African Orthodox Church of Kenya (AOCK) was established in 1929 as a result of cultural clashes between local Africans and European missionaries. At the time, missionary teaching strictly rejected cultural practices such as polygamy, female genital mutilation (FGM), circumcision rituals and dances, consuming traditional brew or tobacco, levirate marriages, communicating with ancestral spirits, and bride price payment, among others.¹⁰ There were also political and educational struggles. Even though legislation had established norms for social life and minimum standards for the provision of housing, food, and medical services, Kenyans working for Europeans still received limited education, lower wages for more work, and no medical attention, all because they were considered less human.¹¹

These Africans decided to found a church that would combine both their African and their Christian ethos. Considering that missionaries were involved in education and that starting an African church meant seeking not only spiritual, but also mental, economic and political liberation, the Kenyans initiated movements that were politically and academically based. As a result, institutions emerged as part of this social liberation such as the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association (KISA) in Muranga and Nyeri areas, and the Kikuyu Karinga Education Associations (KKEA) in Kiambu and Nairobi areas.¹²

While these Kenyans had teachers for their schools, they lacked ordained clergy to perform liturgical services, such as baptism. Consequently, they started looking for a church that would educate and ordain them.¹³ They

⁹ Welbourn, 88.

¹⁰ Carl G. Rosberg Jr., and John Nottingham, *The Myth of "Mau Mau" Nationalism in Kenya* (New York and Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1966): 105-135; F. K. Githieya, *The Freedom of the Spirit*, thesis (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997.); Kamuyu-wa-Kang'ethe, "African Response to Christianity: A Case Study of the Agikuyu of Central Kenya," *Missiology: An International Review*, 16:1 (January 1988): 23-44; Welbourn, 135-136; Robert W. Strayer, *The Making of Mission Communities in East Africa: Anglicans and Africans in Colonial Kenya, 1875-1935* (London/ Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1978), 77-87, 136-150.

¹¹ Robert L. Tignor, *Colonial Transformation of Kenya: The Kamba, Kikuyu and Maasai from 1900-1939* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 4-7.

¹² Welbourn, 83, 151-153.

¹³ Githieya, 95.

wrote to the Anglican bishop of Mombasa in July 1933 to request permission to send two young men to St. Paul's Divinity School (today St Paul's University) in Limuru, Central Kenya, for their theological training. They also asked for an African clergyman who would help them while these two were still in school.¹⁴ Although the English missionaries had originally agreed to help the independents, they later rejected their proposal in full.¹⁵

During this process, James Beuttah, an adherent of KISA who worked in Mombasa, met Archbishop Daniel William Alexander.¹⁶ Alexander was on his way back from Uganda where he had been teaching Ugandans and receiving them into the church. As Uganda was a landlocked country, his boat trip from South Africa brought him to Mombasa. From there he left for Uganda by train, and returned the same way. Beuttah explained the situation of the Kenyan independent church group and Alexander accepted to help find a solution. The Kenyans contacted him again in 1935 through the KISA chairman Johana Kuniya, and Alexander responded positively on May 8 and June 10, 1935. He explained the history and basic teachings of his church and proposed to come by September 1935.¹⁷

Alexander arrived in Gituamba of Muranga County in Central Kenya in 1935, and set up a seminary. He taught seven KISA men and one from KKEA, for eighteen months. As an outcome of this training, he ordained Fr. Arthur Gatungu Gathuna of Nairobi West (KKEA) and Fr. Philip Kiande of Nyeri as well as six archdeacons of KKEA.¹⁸ Alexander left Kenya on July 7, 1937, ten days after the ordinations.¹⁹

East Africans Join Greek Orthodoxy

One member of the Ugandan group, a Greek immigrant in Kampala named Mr. Vlachos, noticed that the practices of the Orthodox Church under Alexander

¹⁴ Rosberg and Nottingham, 127-129.

¹⁵ Strayer, 150-152.

¹⁶ Ciprian Burlacioiu, "Between the United States, South Africa, and East Africa (1921-1940)," *Journal of World Christianity* 6.1 (2016): 82-98; Richard Newman, "Archbishop Daniel William Alexander and the African Orthodox Church," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 16.4 (1983): 615-630; Theodore Natsoulas, "Patriarch McGuire and the Spread of the African Orthodox Church to Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 12:2 (1981): 81-104; Warren C. Platt, "The African Orthodox Church: An Analysis of Its First Decade," *Church History* 58.4 (December 1989): 474-488.

¹⁷ Githieya, 97

¹⁸ Githieya, 98-99; Tillyrides, 49.

¹⁹ Rosberg and Nottingham, 130.

differed from those of traditional Eastern Orthodoxy.²⁰ In 1932, Vlachos introduced the Ugandans to Fr. Nicodemos Sarikas, a Greek priest from Asia Minor serving in Arusha, Tanzania. Sarikas introduced them and later the Kenyans to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa and officially received them into the church in 1942. The link between Alexander and the East Africans thus ceased very early on but his influence made them a unique Eastern Orthodox Church to this very day.

Alexander's Contribution to his Church

Alexander's leadership set a precedent in the administration and management of an indigenous African church. He insisted on the need for apostolic succession, which was the reason why Africans initially accepted to be under the American based African Orthodox Church. To his students in Southern and Eastern Africa, he passed on the importance of this apostolic continuity. He was conscious of the need to keep in contact with the mother church and was faithful in communicating with the African Orthodox Church in the United States. He did not ordain any bishops without the Patriarch until he broke away from them. The same search for apostolic succession prompted him to contact the Greek Orthodox archbishop of Johannesburg and sub-Saharan Africa who was then Metropolitan Isidore (1934-1966) to request affiliation with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa.

Although he did not have a high level of education, Alexander established seminaries in South Africa and later in East Africa to make theological education available for his clergy. He insisted on documenting all church and personal activity, including meetings, synods, and correspondence. He kept records of almost everything, even bank accounts, because he felt it was important for an indigenous church to be self-sustaining and to keep clear records. Alexander insisted on the involvement of women in church leadership, and thus made sure that all clergy wives were in charge of the women's Guild of Saint Monica.

Alexander communicated with many church leaders of his time as well as scholars of Christianity. This showed his ecumenical initiative and his openness to receiving others and to being received by them. His correspondence tells us that there was an African Orthodox Church in England sometime between 1928 and 1959.

²⁰ Welbourn, 89.

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* features two biographies of Archbishop Daniel William Alexander from the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*.²¹ It is important to remember the legacy of important African pioneers like Alexander who brought Orthodoxy to East Africa as an African Instituted Church. Along with others, his boldness and his love for African leadership contributed to planting and nurturing the seed of Orthodoxy in Kenya. Today, the East African Orthodox Church continues to grow. In term of growth, East Africa is the leading Eastern Orthodox region under the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, and has outlived many other churches. This church is unique compared with most Greek Orthodox Churches because it has preserved the church characteristics established by Alexander.

Very. Rev. Protopresbyter Fr. Evangelos Thiani

DACB Advisory Council Member and *JACB* Contributing Editor

December 2017, Nairobi, Kenya

²¹<https://dacb.org/stories/southafrica/alexander-daniel/> ;
<https://dacb.org/stories/southafrica/alexander-daniel2/>