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# Objects of Catholic Conversion in Colonial Buganda: A Study of the Miraculous Medal

*Alison Bennett* | ORCID: 0000-0002-8525-5322

Hallworth Fellow in Political Economy, University of Manchester,  
Manchester, UK

*alison.bennett@manchester.ac.uk*

## Abstract

Adorned with an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary and other Christian emblems and text, the miraculous medal has been an important object of Catholic intercessory prayer since the mid-nineteenth century. The religious and social history of the medal in Europe is relatively well known. However, few scholars have connected the medal's emergence with the spread of the European mission in the wake of nineteenth-century colonial expansion. This article uses the medal to shed new light on the material, corporeal, and gendered aspects of the Catholic Christianization of present-day Buganda, where it fulfilled a variety of functions for missionaries and Baganda alike. For missionaries it served as a key item for proselytizing and propaganda. For some Baganda, meanwhile, it played pivotal roles in a newly emerging form of local religious identity politics. Object analysis of an extant version from Buganda also reveals the medal's material diversity and offers important insight into local agency in the reception and reshaping of Catholic objects. Thus when viewed in non-European contexts, miraculous medals were far more dynamic and multifaceted than has previously been understood.

## Keywords

Uganda – East Africa – missionaries – Catholicism – material culture – miraculous medal

## 1 Introduction

The study of ‘material religion’ or ‘religious things’ has advanced significantly over the past three decades.<sup>1</sup> As Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer note, materiality and material culture have become ‘key terms in the study of religion, generating new empirical questions about how religions shape the world in a concrete manner’ (2012, 6). Studies of African and missionary Christianity have developed along similar lines in recent years. Micromaterial practices and encounters at mission stations, material religious transformations of both colonized and colonizing societies (for example through the exchange of domestic goods, sartorial practices, and architectural styles), missionary ethnographic collecting, and African Christian art are just some of the topics that have occupied historians of Christian expansion across different timeframes and locations.<sup>2</sup> Collectively, this body of research has used an object-focused approach to illuminate not only the development of European missionary expansion and power but crucially local agencies in both reimagining and resisting Euro-Christian cultures.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have also used material culture to deepen our understanding of concepts such as religious hybridity, syncretism, spaces of correlation, and polyontology.<sup>4</sup>

This article builds on this rich body of work and uses a material-culture approach to present a new perspective on the establishment of Catholicism in Buganda during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It takes as its main case study a key component of the Catholic missionary tool kit: the ‘miraculous medal’, which was one of several objects of Catholic material culture transported to Buganda beginning in the late nineteenth century. Previous scholarship on the history of the medal has focused on its links to the rise of Marian devotional practice in France, its original place of manufacture, and Britain, where it was soon imported. However, close analysis of a variety of sources from Buganda reveals that miraculous medals also had significant histories beyond Europe, playing pivotal roles in conversion, missionary propaganda, and local and colonial identity politics.

The article begins by establishing the contemporaneous contexts of the medal’s emergence in Europe and the establishment of the Catholic mission in Buganda. It then explores the importance of material culture generally and the miraculous medal specifically in the activities of four Catholic missionary groups operating in southern Uganda during this era: the French Society of the Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers) and Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (White Sisters), and their British counterparts, Saint Joseph’s Society Missionaries of Mill Hill (Mill Hill Missionaries) and Franciscan Sisters of Mill Hill.<sup>5</sup> Analysis of the promotional materials of these groups, including their home mission magazines, photographic archives, and postcard collections,

reveals that miraculous medals played a range of roles in their evangelizing and propagandizing strategies, and were used to strike a carefully curated balance of both commonality and difference with their new congregation.<sup>6</sup>

To offer a counterpoint to the missionary perspective, the next section uses locally produced sources to consider how some Baganda received and reshaped the medal. Textual and oral records show that the medal was appropriated as a symbol of identity by a newfound Catholic faction emerging in Buganda's contested local polity beginning in the late nineteenth century. Meanwhile, a rare extant medal now in the British Museum (Figure 1) exhibits significant stylistic differences from the European prototype (Figures 2.1 and 2.2), such as multiple accumulated medals, the incorporation of iron beads, and inclusion



FIGURE 1 *Necklace, Af953,24.22*

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FIGURE 2.1–2.2 *Struck Bronze Oval Miraculous Medal, 2009,4157.15*  
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of Luganda text. Attending to these points of material transformation offers an opportunity to explore the role of local epistemologies and material creativity in the conversion process. Here I draw methodological and interpretive stimulus from art historical work on objects of African Christianity by authors such as Cecile Fromont, who argues that ‘looking at specific forms of cultural production and interrogating the historical genealogies and the aesthetic choices of their makers allows us to consider the transformative power of choice and contingency’ in the process of conversion (Fromont, 2014, 17).

The findings yielded by this approach support wider arguments pioneered by the Ugandan scholar John Mary Waliggo about the transformative influence of Ganda audiences, concepts, and cultures on missionary Catholicism during the colonial era (Waliggo 2002).<sup>7</sup> Waliggo’s work forms part of a larger discussion about the nature of religious change in Buganda. For decades scholars of Ugandan history and theology have engaged in rich and vibrant debate about the relationship between precolonial belief systems and Christianity in the region. Kenyan theologian John Mbiti described the parallels between the rituals and symbols of African (including Ugandan) Traditional Religions and Christianity, ultimately arguing that African Christianity was an extension

of earlier spiritual systems (Mbiti 1969).<sup>8</sup> This, Mbiti explained, was why Ugandans took so quickly to imported Christianity. In contrast, critiques of Mbiti – perhaps best encapsulated in the work of his contemporary Okot p'Bitek (1970), but also more recent scholars such as Paul Landau (1999) – all argue that the act of drawing out such links inevitably adopts a generalised Eurocentric framework of meaning and understanding about what religion is and means.<sup>9</sup> This was an assumption also made by early colonial missionaries and anthropologists who sought to study Ugandan terms, practices, and beliefs within a Christian framework. Rather than trying to fit this medal neatly into one side of the debate or the other, I suggest, following Waliggo, that its main significance lies in what it might tell us about the repurposing and transformation of Euro-Catholic devotions by local worshippers.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, although this article focuses on the miraculous medal, it also draws on a small number of other Catholic objects to demonstrate the rich methodological and analytical potential for further object-based research on Christianity in Uganda. Miraculous medals clearly played specific roles in a larger network of Catholic material objects. This is perhaps an obvious point, but worth emphasising given that the historiography on Christian conversion in Uganda currently lies much more prominently with textual proselytizing practices most commonly associated with the Anglican missionaries and their elite converts.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, although the article focuses on the specificities of Buganda, it also draws parallels with and evidence from other regions such as South and East Asia, underscoring the importance of miraculous medals in the wider missionary project.<sup>12</sup>

## 2 The Miraculous Medal in Europe

Miraculous medals are popular sacramental items associated with intercessory prayer. Traditionally, they consist of a single medal, often made of aluminium or silver (or less commonly copper or bronze), held on a chain.<sup>13</sup> On one side of each medal a monogram of the letter M is positioned above a horizontal bar and is surmounted by a cross. Below the bar sit two hearts: one is the Sacred Heart of Jesus crowned with thorns, the other the Immaculate Heart of Mary pierced with a sword. Arising from both hearts are flames. Twelve stars encircle the whole monogram, symbolising the Apostles. On the reverse side of each medal is an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, standing on a globe, with light pouring from her outstretched hands and a crushed serpent at her feet. Mary is also encircled by French or sometimes Latin text, which reads: *Oh Marie*

*conçue sans péchés, priez pour nous qui avons recours à vous* (O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee).

Today miraculous medals are more easily obtainable objects produced on large scales. However, their origins date back to the second half of the nineteenth century. The first miraculous medals were originally produced by the Vincentian congregation in Paris. In 1830 Sister Catherine Labouré, a member of the motherhouse of the Company of Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, had a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary standing on a globe with outstretched hands, from which streams of light emerged (Laurentin 2006). Hearts and a monogram of the letter M were also part of the scene. After describing her vision to her seniors, the Church agreed to the production and dissemination of the medals for use in devotional worship. The final design was created by the medallist Adrien Vachette (1753–1839) (Mack 2003). The first medals were produced in 1832 and were distributed in Paris before spreading across France to other European countries, including Britain, where they were disseminated by the British Daughters of Charity.<sup>14</sup> Officially, all medals were to be manufactured in France by the motherhouse to ensure that they were blessed but also presumably to ensure consistency and standardization (O'Brien 2017).<sup>15</sup>

The emergence of the medals at this time corresponded with the growth of Marian piety as an increasingly popular aspect of European Catholic belief and practice.<sup>16</sup> In Europe miraculous medals had specific functions. Their main function was to promote the Eucharist and the blessed Sacrament through Mary Immaculate (O'Brien 2017). However, Eli Heldaas Seland suggests that users also associated the motifs on the medals with maternal protection, while Susan O'Brien notes that the Church believed that they would encourage the virtues of chastity and purity through their display, and opportunity for engagement with the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Seland 2012; O'Brien 2017).

Marta Ajmar and Catherine Sheffield describe the miraculous medal as 'one of the most successful Catholic items produced in the nineteenth century' (Ajmar and Sheffield 1994, 177). However, references to medals actually being worn by congregations prior to the start of the First World War are thin (O'Brien 2017). As Susan O'Brien highlights, they are rare in the British archival thread, 'hidden in plain sight precisely because [their] field of action was outside churches and chapels: [they were] to be found in the home, on the body, in bags and pockets, tucked into prayer books and letters' (O'Brien 2017, 218). If our knowledge of their use in Britain is fragmentary, our understanding of their history beyond Europe is even more vague. Nevertheless, the rise of this specific Marian devotion occurred contemporaneously with major global missionary expansion in the nineteenth century, and a close reassessment of the

missionary archive in its various forms shows us that the medals were intentionally distributed and reproduced throughout the wider world.

### 3 Catholic Missions in Buganda

The Vincentians (also known as Lazarists) were a key group involved in foreign missions during the nineteenth century. French political interests in Muslim territories at this time gave Vincentian missionaries strong footholds in North Africa, particularly present-day Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt, in addition to Ethiopia and Madagascar (Poole 1979). However, official Vincentian presence in much of eastern Africa is far more recent. The first mission station in Kenya was formed in 1979 and the Uganda station came even later in 2004. It is most likely, then, that miraculous medals first reached present-day Buganda via the White Fathers and White Sisters. These groups, also of French origin, were created to spread Catholicism across eastern Africa. They began operating in Buganda from 1879 and 1899 respectively (Mann Wall 2015).

Like the Vincentians, the White Fathers and Sisters also had a strong attachment to the Blessed Virgin Mary and helped to make the Marian image an important visual symbol across northern and eastern Africa (Ceillier 2011). One of the most important examples of this connection can be seen in the *Notre Dame d'Afrique* (Basilica of Our Lady of Africa) in Algeria. The founder of the White Fathers, Cardinal Lavigerie (1825–1892), completed the construction in 1868. Henceforth, the White Fathers professed themselves to be under the protection of Mary Immaculate, Queen of Africa, and also made her their patron (Ceillier 2011, 177). In 1879 they named their first mission station in Buganda *Sainte Marie du Rubaga* and, with the permission of the *Kabaka* (King) Muteesa I (1837–1884), situated it at the site of the former royal palace (Shorter 2003). The Rubaga station was the first of many institutions that the White Fathers dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Buganda. Missionary letters in *Les Missions Catholiques* (*MC*), a weekly illustrated magazine published by *L'Œuvre de la Propagation de la Foi*, also tell us that the early Catholic missionaries to Buganda, such as Siméon Lourdel, used visual depictions of The Blessed Virgin Mary in their early attempts to convert *Kabaka* Muteesa I.<sup>17</sup> As one edition from 1881 states: 'One day the Father brought a catechism in pictures ... the King was very satisfied ... seeing the picture representing the Annunciation he was struck by the modesty of the Holy Virgin, and subsequently he asked in all the pictures where was the Virgin Mary' (*Les Missions Catholiques* [*MC*] 1881, 230–234). Though clearly missionary propaganda, this quote highlights that, like the miraculous medal, visual images and buildings



served as key material, visual, and spatial conduits for Mary's, and in turn the missionaries', introduction and establishment in the region.

Catholicism was just one of many forms of belief available in late nineteenth-century Buganda (Médard 2007). Prior to the 1840s, the Baganda exercised a broad and evolving set of so-called 'Traditionalist' beliefs and practices, but during the course of the nineteenth century other religions and denominations also emerged in the region. Islam reached Buganda in the 1840s with the arrival of Swahili traders from Zanzibar (Twaddle 1972). In 1877 British Anglican missionaries representing the CMS arrived, and were followed two years later by the French Catholic White Fathers.<sup>18</sup> The *Kabakas* of Buganda shifted allegiance from one faction to another, and initially ordinary Ganda were also free to move fluidly between them in this religiously hybrid space (Hansen, 1984). As Richard Reid argues, 'the redemptive, curative and temporal power of evolving spiritual systems [in precolonial Uganda] helps to explain why so many Ugandans also embraced imported faiths and took up ostensibly novel forms of belief' (Reid 2017, 173–174). Other factors included 'intellectual curiosity and a preparedness to engage with dynamic new ideas; in emulation of rulers who, at the same time, used new faiths to enhance their own authority' (Reid 2017, 174).

However, the close proximity of different missionary groups soon caused theological clashes and rivalry (Twaddle 1988). By the late 1880s these tensions developed into a series of violent religious civil wars between converts, supported by European missionaries and ammunition (Médard 2007; Waliggo 1976). The religious underpinning of the wars was further entangled in the so-called 'scramble' for eastern Africa by different European powers and Egypt. Thus Protestant missionaries, who were predominantly British, came to be strongly associated with British power, and the Catholic missionaries, who were predominantly French, tended to be associated with French power (Hansen 2002, 158; Kassimir 1991, 360). However, local Ugandan loyalties were often personal to certain figures – such as Scottish Calvinist Alexander Mackay, leader of CMS Protestant missionaries, and Simeon Lourdel M.Afr. on the French Catholic side – just as much as they were national or linguistic. Although Catholic converts and missionaries outnumbered Protestants, between 1882 and 1885 concerns about political marginalisation and violent persecution led Catholic converts and missionaries to flee en masse from Buganda's capital to Buddu (Earle 2017; Waliggo 1976) where Father Henry Streicher commissioned the building of the *Villa-Maria* mission (Mary's Village), further encouraging devotion to her among the Catholic population (Shorter 2003; Waliggo 1988). Back in Buganda, Muteesa I's successor, *Kabaka* (King) Mwanga added to Catholic concerns by executing twenty-two Catholic

and twenty-three Anglican Christian converts from the Ganda court in 1886 (Faupel 1965). Missionary letters and diary extracts in *Les Missions Catholiques* magazine emphasize the dangers that Catholic missionaries continued to feel well into the 1890s.

To abate further factional tensions associated with national identity, and to ensure the successful continuation of the Catholic missionary project in Buganda, the White Fathers invited members of St Joseph's Foreign Missionary Society of Mill Hill – the British strand of the White Fathers – to settle and work east of Kampala. Their presence complemented the work of the White Fathers operating in the west. In 1895 the first Mill Hill Missionaries arrived in Buganda, led by Bishop Hanlon (1862–1937). They were followed by six Franciscan Sisters of Mill Hill in January 1903 (Tourigny 1979). What can a study of their material culture tell us about the work of these Catholic missionaries, and what was the role of the miraculous medal in particular?

#### 4 Catholic Missionary Material Culture and the Uses of the Miraculous Medal in Buganda

A number of textual and visual sources offer snapshots on the importance of Catholic material culture for missionaries as they ventured into their new mission fields. One particularly useful source is the *St Joseph's Advocate* (*SJA*), a quarterly magazine published by the Mill Hill missionaries between 1883 and 1937. The magazine was designed to raise awareness and funds among priestly and lay audiences in Britain to support Catholic missionary work around the world, including in Uganda. Notes from the field, annual reports, and requests for funds and supplies were all key features of the publication. Together, these parts of the magazine and other promotional materials such as photographs and postcards offer windows on how the material world was woven into the proselytising and propaganda work of the missionaries.

When the first Mill Hill Missionaries prepared for their departure to Buganda in 1895, religious material culture was integral to the planning of their new mission stations. The *St Joseph's Advocate* edition for that year describes in detail the supplies that the missionaries selected to take with them. Despite the known difficulties of the trip, including long journey times and the financial expense of transporting objects to Buganda via shipping companies and porters, the Mill Hill Missionaries' inventory included silver-plated monstrances, thuribles, stations of the Cross, sanctuary lamps, large crucifixes, altar cards, large pictures, purificators, cottas, lavabos, altar cloths, ciboriums, and stoles (Hanlon 1895–1896; *St Joseph's Advocate* [*SJA*] Annual Report 1896).<sup>19</sup>

These were all vital components of Catholic liturgical practice in Europe. The effort required to transport them to Buganda illustrates that the missionaries believed they were also crucial to recreating the experience of Catholic religious practice in 'the field'.

The White Fathers had already successfully transported some of these items to Buganda by this time. However, according to missionary letters to *Les Missions Catholiques* (MC) magazine, the spoliation of Catholic material culture by Protestants and Muslims was commonplace during the civil wars of the 1880s and 1890s. In September 1889 Cardinal Lavigerie reported that Mgr Livinhac's mission was completely 'despoiled. The bishop's ornaments, his chapel, and even his vestments' had been taken (MC 1889, 121–124). Father Denoit recorded that 'a tassel of cord from the sacristy' and a 'beautiful cross' that belonged to local Catholic leader Honorat Nyonyintono had been 'looted and stolen from his house' in October 1888 (Denoit 1899, 153–156). Mgr Jean-Joseph Hirth, then Apostolic Vicar of Victoria Nyanza, wrote in May 1891 that following an attack on the Catholics by the Muslim army in Kampala, he had hidden many belongings on one of Lake Victoria's islands for safety. On subsequent feast days he could only use 'poor ornaments' (Hirth 1891, 589–591). And in January 1892, during an attack on Mwanga (who was then proclaiming to practice Catholicism) and Rubaga Cathedral, he wrote of Protestants taking 'spoil' (Hirth 1892a, 259–263).

Nevertheless, staged postcards and photographs of newly established churches produced by the White Fathers from 1895 emphasise the continued importance of Catholic material culture in missionary propaganda through the display of decorated altarpieces. Figure 3 depicts an altarpiece framed by the reed structure of Our Lady Queen of Virgins Kisubi Catholic Church, constructed between Kampala and Entebbe in 1895. In this postcard our gaze is directed toward the altarpiece and its liturgical objects, which serve as the focal point of the image. Although the altar and its objects recreate a European liturgical scene, they were housed in a building constructed by Ganda workmen using traditional practices and styles that had their own local meanings. The church's structure bore many similarities to the traditional reed, wattle, and daub method used in other notable architectural sites in Buganda, such as the royal tombs built in Kasubi in 1882 which became a religious centre for the royal family where important rituals were performed (Kigongo and Reid 2007). Thus in this particular landmark church, imported European objects coexisted and converged with local architectural traditions to create a new form of liturgical experience for worshippers.

Although the Mill Hill Missionaries also put great effort into transporting heavy liturgical items on the arduous journey, many were lost and damaged

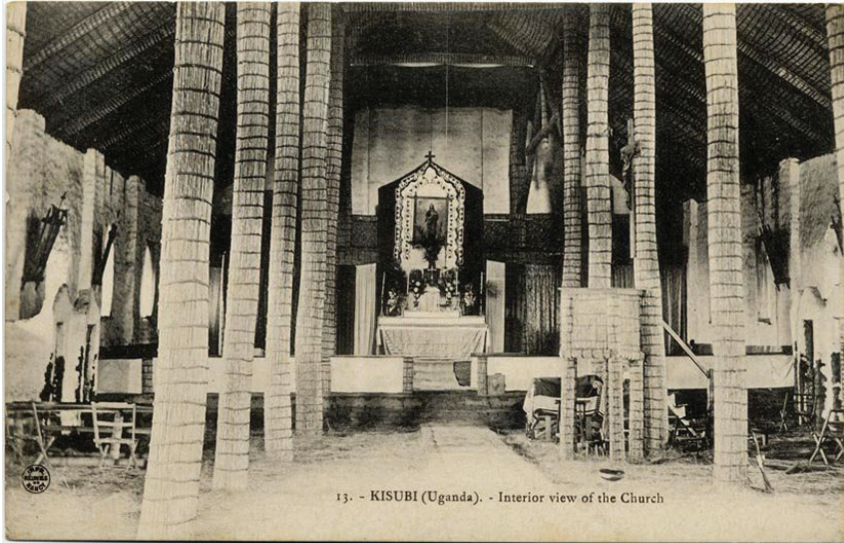


FIGURE 3 Interior of Catholic Church at Kisubi, Uganda, Missionary Postcard Collection, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library, *n.d.* Retrieved from the Atla Digital Library

en route (Hanlon 1895–1896).<sup>20</sup> The following year (1896), they estimated that there were already 83,000 Catholics in Uganda, but given the obvious transportation difficulties it is likely that there was not nearly enough imported liturgical equipment available to serve public mass to all (Prendergast 1896b). Miraculous medals (*midaali*), on the other hand, were small, portable items that were ideal for aiding much larger numbers of people in private devotion. Medals were also easier to migrate in and around the region than the missionaries themselves. John Mary Waliggo notes that ‘devotional life had been one of the basic characteristics of the Catholics from the beginning. Since they had no scripture books to read, and since Lavigerie’s catechism was to be memorized ... the self-reliant Catholic community ... became attracted to the devotion of Our Lady’ (Waliggo 2002, 86). In the absence of priests, churches, and liturgical objects, the dispersal of miraculous medals therefore allowed a much broader population to conduct some of the personal and private Catholic rituals.

Medals were not only light and easier to import, they also came to play essential roles in particular stages of the conversion process. As Father Prendergast describes in his letter to *St Joseph’s Advocate* in 1895, ‘It seems medals are given to catechumens; crosses and rosaries to Christians. We have none’ (Prendergast 1896a, 113). By 1897 *St Joseph’s Advocate* recorded an

estimated 6,300 catechumens in Mengo, Nagalama, and Mulajje alone (*SJA Annual Report for the Year 1897*). Vast numbers of medals were clearly required to accompany, and in some places even stand in for, teachers of textual catechisms. This evidence also tells us that in addition to playing a prominent role in catechism the medals were also part of a larger relational network of objects of devotion and conversion, with each object defining a particular stage of the conversion process.

The accession record of a rare medal held by the British Museum states that miraculous medals were also given to children by their mothers during baptism.<sup>21</sup> Photographs taken by the White Fathers depicting mothers and babies wearing medals in other African countries such as Congo and Ghana suggest that this was a common practice across colonial Africa.<sup>22</sup> This article has already outlined the close connection between the medal and the pious image of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a maternal and protective figure in the European context. In the Ugandan context, the small portable medal, which we might describe as '*Bilderfahrzeuge*' or 'image vehicle', to use Aby Warburg's concept, offered Catholic missionaries opportunities to introduce and disseminate Mary's image widely. Its role in baptism would have also served to connect her image to their ideals of motherhood, family, and gender, and to project her – as the mother of Christ and God – as a model for new mothers to emulate and their children to revere.

Studies of other missionary projects in nineteenth-century Africa demonstrate that discourses on the topics of motherhood, family, and gender were often underpinned by strong racial tones. Historians including Susan Pederson, Lynn Thomas, and Iris Berger have shown that the bodies of eastern African women were sites of deep politicization and intervention by missionaries and colonial officials, who imposed European values about reproduction, childbirth, gender roles, and family structure while undercutting existing traditions around these issues (Pederson 1991; Thomas 2003; Berger 2016). Idealised female gender norms based on white British constructions were central to this discourse. Authors such as Anna Johnston, Emily Manktelow, and Esme Cleall have also demonstrated that Protestant missionaries imagined and performed ideals of both self and Other as they sought to reform non-Western family life (Johnston 2009; Manktelow 2013, 2019; Cleall 2012). As Cleall argues, implicit in these narratives 'were both the missionary desire to intervene materially in indigenous families and their representation of British models as superior' (Cleall 2012, 35).<sup>23</sup> Building on Johnston, Cleall further notes that 'missionary propaganda presented missionary women as ideal wives and mothers, and "heathen" women as deficient' (Cleall 2012, 7).

Catholic female missionaries in Uganda also projected a discourse of superiority over local women. They did so in part by modelling their behaviour and image as protective maternal figures on the Blessed Virgin Mary. There are clear visual similarities between the image of Mary on the miraculous medal from Uganda in Figures 1 and 6, and the female missionary pictured in the Catholic propaganda image in Figure 4. Both characters display open and welcoming yet majestic poses; both are clothed in flowing habits and robes; and both focus their gaze directly on the viewer, demanding their focus and attention. The intersection between the image of Mary, her female apostles, and the narrative of racial superiority is also evident in Figure 4. Visually, the postcard, which was produced by the White Sisters in Uganda, shows the classic colonial missionary trope of a white female missionary as a saviour of African children who model submissive postures of adoration below her.<sup>24</sup> Nicholas Thomas also highlights this trope in his study of early twentieth-century Methodist mission photographs in the western Solomon Islands, noting that ‘individual missionaries were presented not merely as adult parents who cared for and naturally supervised their native children but also as singularly transcendent and historically empowered figures’ (Thomas 1992, 383). The image in Figure 4 gives a similar impression, while the accompanying quote from Cardinal Lavignerie explicitly presents white female missionaries as spiritually and morally superior to local women:

In spite of the zeal of the missionaries, their efforts will never produce sufficient fruits unless they are helped by female apostles, who alone can freely approach infidel women and make them understand their profound abasement by the spectacle of the moral height to which the Christian woman has come.

This quote demonstrates that creating a ‘spectacle’ of the maternalism of white female missionaries (and thus in turn the Blessed Virgin Mary) was perceived as crucial to Catholic success and the salvation of women in the region. Giving Mary material and visual form through miraculous medals helps us to understand how the spectacle and power of Mary, and thus in turn her white, female, missionary apostles, were constructed through objects.<sup>25</sup>

That the medal was distributed at baptism and subsequently displayed on Ganda bodies built this spectacle further. In the European context the miraculous medal was to be worn on the body, close to the heart, to facilitate a visceral, sensory and personal connection with the Blessed Virgin Mary and God. However, as Jean Allman and Hildi Hendrickson demonstrate, the bodily praxis



FIGURE 4 *Mère Claver à l'Uganda (Mother Claver in Uganda)*, by *Soeurs Blanches du Cardinal Lavigerie*, Missionary Postcard Collection, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library

of dress and adornment in nineteenth-century Africa also helped to forge what Hendrickson calls 'embodied identities' (Allman 2004; Hendrickson 1996).<sup>26</sup> In her discussion of the history of crucifix pendants, Robin M. Jensen similarly argues that they were worn for purposes of both personal piety and public display (Jensen 2017). For missionaries in Buganda miraculous medals, like crucifix pendants, were crucial to both the embodiment of Catholic belief and to the outward performance of Catholic identity. Distributing and placing the miraculous medal with its imagery of the Blessed Virgin Mary onto local bodies offered an important way for missionaries to encourage personal and public (or inward and outward) embodied Catholic identities among the Baganda – identities that aligned with and communicated their views on the family, reproduction, gender, and race.

Further emphasising the important connection between the medal and Catholic identity, in 1902 Mill Hill missionary Rev. Father Leonard van den Bergh joyfully reported to *St Joseph's Advocate* that in northern Uganda 'Go where you may, rosaries, crosses, medals, and scapulars will decorate the breasts of the hundreds who pass you on your way' (van den Bergh 1902, 191). For Father van den Bergh, the display of these items likely served as vitally conspicuous public testimonials of Catholic identity and numerical strength at a time when Catholic missionaries and their converts were being undermined politically. Later, in 1918, Father Frederick Wright stated, 'The natives say they look like Protestants when they have no religious emblems to wear' (Wright 1918, 98). The outward material display of public piety via miraculous medals and other devotional items was thus important to the missionaries since it marked not only their evangelizing success but also the formation of an ostensibly collective Catholic identity in the face of denominational and political rivalry. In the political context and aftermath of religious civil war, miraculous medals offered a way to designate political loyalties in a kingdom increasingly organized around international religions.<sup>27</sup>

To Father van den Bergh, the visual presence of miraculous medals, rosaries, crosses, and scapulars on the breasts of local people was significant. To historians they have remained hidden in plain sight. Yet these conspicuous items were not just common, but also a deliberate feature of the missionary visual archive – carefully pictured on the bodies of both the converters and the 'converted', marking both their commonality and difference. A carefully curated balance of both was key to the missionaries' sense of success and superiority. For example, the focal point to which our eye is drawn in Figure 4 is not just the female missionary, but also the crucifix around her neck. That the child on her lap does not wear the medal but grasps it in its palm emphasises a difference between the two figures, but also the potential for the



child's redemption. The central positioning of the crucifix in the image also suggests that material objects such as crucifixes and medals were just as key to the Catholic projects of conversion and propaganda as the missionaries doing the proselytizing.

Objects were also central to the visual archive that Catholic missions in Buganda produced of local people living close to their mission stations. The White Fathers and Sisters took thousands of images documenting their missions across eastern Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Important collections are now held in the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art and the Yale Divinity Library. Photographs were also an important part of missionary magazines such as *St Joseph's Advocate*, and others were printed as postcards.<sup>28</sup> A dominant stylistic type within these collections is the informal anthropometric image, which utilised side and profile poses of people as a tool for emphasizing supposedly different human 'types'.<sup>29</sup> The objects of clothing and adornment worn by the sitters were also a key part of the classification and stereotype. Individuals and groups were often posed in front of a plain or blurred background to accentuate body features, clothing, and ornamentation.<sup>30</sup> This style of image was common across the European colonial world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the images produced by the Catholic missions in eastern Africa are framed using this stylistic trope, drawing our attention to both bodily and materially decorative features. In some images the sitters wear local styles of neckwear; in others, such as Figure 5, they wear Catholic devotions. Although all are wearing neckwear of some sort, the missionary aesthetic and visual rhetoric dictated that the Catholic necklace represented that sitter's successful civilization, while the other denoted 'primitiveness' that needed to be civilized. At the same time, the categorization of the child in Figure 5 as a 'type' (as described in the caption) demonstrates that the missionaries still viewed her as an object rather than a subject, and thus as something different from themselves, despite her conversion and appropriation of the 'correct' religious material culture.

Taken together, all of these textual and visual sources show us how missionaries culturally constructed Catholic conversion through material, corporeal, sartorial, and visual means. Within each of these approaches, the miraculous medal and other interconnected objects were nearly always present and fulfilled a variety of key roles. Missionaries clearly used medals in large numbers as part of their material strategy for conversion and propaganda. But how did the Baganda themselves understand and utilise the medal?



FIGURE 5 *Muganda Girl Type* by Mission of the White Fathers, Missionary Postcard Collection, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library

## 5 Ganda Reception of the Miraculous Medal

Although Catholic missionary texts from Buganda did discuss the local uptake of the medal, this was usually to demonstrate the quantitative expansion of the Church. Given that the missionaries used the magazine to fundraise, these figures also functioned strategically to convince believers at home of missionary success. For example, in 1891 Bishop Streicher claimed that he brought a thousand medals to Uganda, though according to John Mary Waliggo 'despite his policy of giving them only to those who had mastered the prayers, within a month all were taken' (Waliggo 2002, 74). By 1918 Father Frederick Wright, based in Kampala, also remarked, 'I am still besieged with requests for rosaries, scapulars and medals – which I haven't got' (Wright 1918, 98). Father Wright suggested that the Ganda were actively requesting medals and other similar items from the missionaries. This was a consistent claim among the missionary reports sent to *St. Joseph's Advocate* magazine. In 1899 a report from Father van den Bergh, based in in Naggalama, contained a specific request for miraculous medals to be sent out to Uganda since they would be 'mighty welcome to the natives' (van den Bergh 1899, 393). Three years later a report from Rev. Plunkett made another request on behalf of a group of Ganda for the miraculous medal in particular:

I wrote down the names of over forty men and boys all belonging to one chief – a nominal Catholic – who asked for and received medals of Our Lady and declared their intention of attending religious instruction. But it remains to be seen how many of them will persevere in their good intention till they reach the baptismal font some years hence.

PLUNKETT 1902, 188

This quote demonstrates that missionaries were aware that although some Ganda requested and wore the Catholic insignia, this was not necessarily a sure sign of their dedication to Catholic conversion. What remains obscured in these brief discussions are deeper interpretations of and reflection on the potentially multifarious meanings and uses of these items for local people across various cultural contexts. The textual and visual sources of Catholic missionaries contain a paucity of firsthand local voices, particularly from local women, and do not acknowledge the potential complexity underpinning these requests, nor any instances of persuasion or coercion by the missionaries. Unpicking how and why miraculous medals were sought and worn is a difficult task with fragmentary results that inevitably focus on elites. However, doing so is essential, since as the following sections indicate the Baganda were not simply passive or uniform consumers of European Christian material culture

as many missionary sources suggest. Baganda on all parts of the religious spectrum loudly critiqued one another's religious material practices. While some Catholic Baganda actively sought out the European version of the medal and wore it as a mark of their religious (and in turn political) identity, others exercised different approaches in their fashioning, construction, and use of the medal.

## 6 Local Oral and Textual References

Locally published textual sources offer one window on Kiganda uses of the medal. Buganda is notable for the large literary output that emerged from the late nineteenth century among its intellectual elites, particularly Catholic and Muslim converts and dissidents who engaged in lively theological and political debate with their elite Protestant counterparts (Earle 2017; Twaddle 1974; Rowe 1969, 1989). Some references to the medal can be found in these texts, which evidence its use in rival politico-religious discourses.<sup>31</sup> For example, in 1890 the Protestant *Katikkiro* (prime minister) Sir Apolo Kagawa (1869–1927) wrote that Protestants often lambasted Catholics about their medals, which they argued were like the charms of the Traditionalist gods *Nnede* and *Kibuuka* (Rowe 1971). During the civil wars of the 1880s Mgr Hirth further recorded that Protestants put rosaries and medals 'round the necks of dogs' and sacred ornaments were 'publicly dressed ridiculously' (Hirth 1892b, 413–415). Likewise, members of the Protestant party, whom Kagawa identified as the 'people of the Religion of the Book', were, he noted, called 'twins of Satan' by Catholics when they carried their books with them (Manarin 2008, 193). Both of these examples are interesting for the partial inversions that they offer of the traditional missionary ethnography on African religious material culture. Here African commentators were negatively judging European religious objects, albeit partly in comparison to Traditionalist religious paraphernalia in the Catholic case.

Decades later, the first prime minister of an independent Uganda, Benedicto Kiwanuka (1922–1972), a Catholic, also made reference to the medal. According to his private papers, in 1953 he secured sanction from the Bank of England for the sum of \$10 to the Central Association of the Miraculous Medal for the purchase of medals (Benedicto Kagimu Mugumba Kiwanuka (BKMK) Papers, BKMK Papers/Villa-Maria O.B. Association/SOURCE).<sup>32</sup> At the end of the following decade Kiwanuka also recorded the 1969 pilgrimage to Uganda by Pope Paul VI (1897–1978) and noted his pleasure at the gifts of medals that the Pontiff left behind. These records provide evidence on their own terms, and beyond the confines of the missionary archive, that some elite Catholic Ganda did actively seek out and wear the European version of the medal. They also

emphasise the continued significance of these medals for local Catholic leaders and European visitors alike in the late colonial and postcolonial periods (BIKMK Papers/Loose Papers/SOURCE). Albert Bade's biography of Kiwanuka also discusses Kiwanuka's devotion to the Virgin and his use of the rosary (Bade 1996; Earle 2017).

Oral sources provide another important alternative to the European missionary archive and a brief insight into local perceptions of the miraculous medal. In Buganda a useful source is the book of historical Luganda proverbs compiled by Ferdinand Walser in 1982 (Walser 1982). One particular proverb cites the medal and reads as follows: *Nnampa-we-ngwa: ng'omukatpliki atalina mudaali* ('A "sit-on-the-fence": like a Catholic wearing no medal [rosary]'). This proverb has two key points of relevance for this essay. On the one hand, like Kaggwa's reference, it demonstrates the powerful link that had been established between miraculous medals and the Catholic Baganda within local identity politics (Manarin 2008). On the other hand, it also suggests that there were Catholics who were locally perceived to straddle religious beliefs (sitting on the fence) because they did not wear the medal. The medal, then, was not always used in a consistent fashion among the Catholic population.

## 7 Religious Material Culture and the Question of Local Agency

The design and construction of a rare, extant version of the medal from Uganda offers more substantive evidence of deviation from the European missionary mode of fashioning. Scholarly analyses of Catholic material culture from early-modern western Africa and Latin America provide rich evidence of local artists and patrons actively remaking objects of Catholic devotion into innovative new items that drew on both local and foreign influences (Fromont 2014; Jensen 2017). However, studies of nineteenth century colonised regions tend to emphasise European missionaries' suppression of local cultures in line with the shift to high imperialism.<sup>33</sup>

The nature of Catholic conversion in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Buganda has been a topic of debate for several scholars. Despite the Vatican's official canonization of the Catholic 'Ugandan Martyrs', Ronald Kassimir's historical study of popular Catholicism in Uganda argues that in contrast to early modern Latin America, for example, 'the degree of syncretism and assimilation in Ugandan Catholicism was less thorough'. There was 'no space from the church for "folk Catholicism"' as there was in other places and at other times (Kassimir 1999, 257). In contrast, John Mary Waliggo argues that despite what missionary propaganda material suggests about the rigid and conservative hierarchies of the Catholic Church in Buganda and the dominance of

white leadership, there is some evidence of hybrid approaches to Catholic culture and concepts (Waliggo 2002). Deogratus Kyanda Kannamwangi and Carol Summers suggest that there were also opportunities for local converts to achieve secular and religious status and power (Summers, 2009: 64; Kannamwangi, 2001). Bishop Henri Streicher, vicar apostolic of Uganda from 1897–1933, encouraged the formation of Baganda catechists and priests, calling for ‘men who would remain Baganda but be full priests’ (Summers 2009, 64). While the first priests were ordained in Buddu in 1913, ‘Christian chiefs’ were carrying out evangelistic activities in Buddu much earlier (Summers 2009; Waliggo 2002) and helping to indigenize Catholic practice (Kannamwangi, 2021). Popes Pius XI and XII also encouraged greater lay participation in the Church Mission in the 1930s and 1940s (Summers 2009). In the interwar period a devotional pietistic lay group dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, called ‘The Legion of Mary’, emerged and was organized across Uganda, particularly in rural communities. However, many Legionnaires continued to engage in traditional ritual practices and rely on witchdoctors (Kassimir 1999, 258).

As a result of active local participation in the Church, Waliggo argues that the Catholicism that emerged in Buganda was an ‘adaptation of aspects of Kiganda religious and social sentiment and symbolism into the Catholic faith and practice’ (Waliggo 2002, 79). Waliggo offers some examples of this type of religious blending, including through the construction of Catholic church buildings, a job coordinated by Catholic chiefs rather than European missionaries. As already discussed, the Catholic chiefs constructed many of these buildings in the image of Buganda’s royal palace (Waliggo 2002). Furthermore, Jonathon Earle notes that *Villa Maria*, the White Fathers’ first mission in Buddu, was not only ascribed to Mary – the *Chapelle de Notre Dame* – but its construction was also based on the residence of the Ganda Queen Mother. Moreover, Mary ‘was given the variant titles of Buganda’s *nnamasole*, including *nnaluggi* (head-door) and *nnabijjano* (one who is full of surprises)’ (Earle 2017, 187). The White Fathers also modelled their own habits on the white robes of Algerian Arabs (the *gandoura* for the cassock and *burnous* for the mantle), and their rosary and cross were modelled on the *mesbaha* of the Marabouts. Most significantly for the purpose of this article, Waliggo notes that Cardinal Lavigerie left the distribution of medals, as well as the veneration of saints and images, to the Ganda superiors, despite missionary propaganda suggesting otherwise (Waliggo 2002). Henri Médard briefly notes that the medal signified the luck and blessings of an earlier set of indigenous charms (*nsibira*) (Médard 2007), and as Waliggo further elaborates, ‘what emerged was a Marian devotion that had its origin in the White Fathers, but fully adapted to Ganda culture and mentality’ (Waliggo 2002, 87). Close physical analysis of an actual medal develops this important point further.

## 8 Object Analysis

In 1952 a striking composite necklace entered the Africa collections of what was then the Department of Ethnography at the British Museum (Figures 1 and 7). Initial analysis of the necklace draws quick comparisons to the French prototype of the miraculous medal created by the Daughters of Charity. This finding is significant because very few non-European medals from this era survive. These medals portray the same low-relief Catholic iconography as the French medals produced by the Daughters of Charity. One side of the medal shows the Blessed Virgin Mary, hands outstretched and encircled by text; the other displays the distinctive relief of the letter 'M' merged with the sign of the Cross and surrounded by thirteen stars. This necklace therefore demonstrates continuity with the European prototype, yet there are significant material differences in its material inventory that set it apart.

An assemblage of seven medals rather than one are held on thick, cylindrical iron beads and thread, most likely made of palm fibre or hide rather than the thin, looped, and unobtrusive metal chain that held most European miraculous medals. The text on the individual medal is written in the Luganda rather than French or Latin vernacular. The serpent below Mary's feet is also difficult to discern. Although these are seemingly small discrepancies, these deviations are, I suggest, historically significant. We do not know who the owner or maker was since the British Museum archive does not record any information about the necklace's provenance other than the fact that it entered the Museum's collections in 1953, and prior to this was part of the Church Missionary Society's museum collection. Despite this dearth of information, the composition of the medal itself tells us that its maker drew on multiple visual, material, linguistic, religious, and symbolic influences. How can we understand these choices? Other studies of Ugandan history, ethnography, and archaeology allow us to root some of the individual material and aesthetic elements in local historical, social, and cultural contexts, and to offer some tentative explanations.

## 9 Accumulation of Medals

Material accumulation has long been considered an important facet of central African artistic and aesthetic expression. As Arnold Rubin noted (1975), accumulative configurations are often not the result of random profusion but are rather a carefully considered form of epistemological organisation. The increased weight and incorporation of multiple local and imported materials that often accompany accumulation mean that it is also associated with prosperity, power, and cosmopolitan sophistication. Scholars have noted the



FIGURE 6 Detail of 'Necklace', Af953,24,22

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complex accumulative compositions of other central African objects such as *Minkisi* and crucifixes from Kongo, which both merged European and local materials into new physical forms and visual discourses (Fromont 2014). We may add to this body of knowledge the miraculous medal in Figure 6. Here the accumulation of multiple miraculous medals with meaningful local materials and visual forms served to create an entirely new object that demanded new modes of use, engagement, and display.

## 10 Incorporation of Iron

In addition to multiple medals, this object also incorporates other materials that had important precolonial social and spiritual associations. The iron beads used in the necklace are almost certainly of local manufacture. Their inclusion represents an important stylistic, material, and cosmological divergence from the European prototype. The southern and western regions of Uganda had a long and established history of ironworking, smelting, and smithing long before the arrival of Europeans. Bunyoro, Kooki, Karagwe, and Buhaya (the latter two regions now in present-day Tanzania) were particularly important centres (Doyle 2006; Reid and MacLean 1995; Schmidt 1997). In 1911 the missionary ethnographer John Roscoe also wrote about and photographed smelting technologies in Buddu, which, as previously described, was the main centre of Catholicism in colonial Buganda. According to Roscoe, a clan from Buddu were smiths to the king of Buganda (Roscoe 1911). The sophisticated iron products that emerged from these and other local sites represented what art historian Christopher Spring describes as the 'high-technology of pre-industrial African material culture' (Spring 2009, 94). Both the finished iron product and its manufacture had social and cosmological significance, meaning that the beads on this necklace likely played more than just a decorative or utilitarian function.



Materials mattered in Buganda. Durable and portable, iron, like brass and copper (also highly desirable, but imported), was a valuable commodity, often incorporated into the possessions of wealthy individuals. The assemblage and weight of these local and imported metallic materials on the necklace likely increased the owner's status further.

However, iron held cosmological significance as well. The technical and ritual knowledge required to transform rock into molten metal invested iron objects with a special potency.<sup>34</sup> For this reason iron objects played particularly important roles in pre-colonial royal rituals and displays of power.<sup>35</sup> A survey of objects in the British Museum shows that iron studs were used in protective amulets from Buganda, and iron beads specifically were also used as decorative objects from other areas across Uganda and eastern Africa, particularly on garments belonging to married women, suggesting that they had gendered associations.<sup>36</sup> Smelting was also a highly gendered process. Andrew Reid and Rachel MacLean have demonstrated that iron in Karagwe was only worked by men, while the furnace represented female authority and fertility and thus the well-being of society (Reid and MacLean 1995). Other scholars have also shown that the connections between iron, gender, and sexuality made by Reid and MacLean also apply elsewhere in similar forms (Iles 2014). Did the inclusion of iron beads on this miraculous medal necklace therefore represent a deliberate convergence of cross-cultural materials, metaphors, and images related to reproduction, gender, and spiritual belief? Could the fire emerging from Mary's hands have held a different significance to the Baganda, representing, for example, the fire of the female furnace? We do not yet know where the beads on the miraculous medal necklace were produced, nor the more precise social or cosmological significance that they held for the communities in which they were used. Further research using archaeological, oral and ethnographic approaches to reconstruct their local meaning and use more systematically is thus clearly needed. Nevertheless, the observations of MacLean, Reid, and others offer tentative and tantalising insights into some of the possibilities and demonstrate the significance of this new material addition to the necklace.

## 11 The Serpent Image

Another aspect of the medal that deserves interrogation is the image of the serpent. The image of Mary crushing the head of a snake is ubiquitous across European medals. That it is so unclear on the patina of these examples from

Buganda is unusual and should warrant careful consideration. The snake's lack of clarity may have been an active decision made by its creator, or it may be due to excessive physical engagement through rubbing by the owner, perhaps as a method of activation as was common with other locally manufactured power objects to enable a connection with unseen spirits or forces. It may simply be a result of age and general wear and tear. Although the exact sentiments of the maker and user are unknown, evidence about the opposing cosmological views of the snake by missionaries and the inhabitants of Buddu offers a powerful provocation for thinking about why the image cannot be clearly seen.

In Christianity the snake is a complex entity with multiple associations, but is generally considered a tyrannical creature with links to Satan.<sup>37</sup> The worship of snakes among non-Europeans was thus a concern of Catholic missionaries in the field. In 1886 a Mill Hill missionary in Madras wrote an article in *St. Joseph's Advocate* titled 'Snake-Worship and its Consequences'. The missionary's main complaint was that 'heathen women who are anxious to become mothers' were paying devotions to a serpent god. The article was accompanied by a dramatic illustration of a venomous cobra to emphasise the snake's danger (No author, *SJA* 1886, 269). Two decades later missionaries in India were still concerned about the worship of snakes. Writing about offerings made to a snake god in his mission field, Rev. J. Aelen declared:

Only the propagation of Christianity is able to convince them that their snake-worship is a real devil worship. Great therefore was our joy to welcome the good Sisters here, because it has been evidenced so often, that the self-sacrificing charity of the Sisters conquers where the persuasion of the Missionary fails.

AELEN 1906, 589

In missionary ideology the snake was thus not only linked to Satan but also entangled in unfavourable ideas about non-European religions and non-European women. In the colonial context, the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary crushing the snake thus took also on new gendered and racialised meanings for missionaries.

However, in his discussion of precolonial African religions, John Mbiti explains that the snake was an important symbol for a number of African communities and did not always embody the type of sinister connotations rendered by Christian missionaries (Mbiti 1969). The snake had a prominent position in the origin stories of the Buganda kingdom that were told by healers and elites and passed down to successive generations. In these stories the snake took

the role of a king named Bemba who had authority to heal Buganda (Kaggwa 1901). In 1909 the missionary John Roscoe wrote an article describing his witnessing of 'python worship' on an estate called Bulonge in Buddu (Roscoe 1909, 88). Roscoe described a temple (*sabo*) maintained by members of the Heart (*Mutima*) clan, including a medium and a female resident. Two snakes lived at the temple and 'the chief duties of the python were to give increase of children' (Roscoe 1909, 89). According to Roscoe, even the kings asked for blessings from the pythons so that they might have children. In a more recent and nuanced account, historian Neil Kodesh describes these snakes as being linked to broader ideas of well-being, particularly around the shores of Lake Victoria where 'python centers' formed what he calls 'part of an intellectual complex' that linked pythons, ancestral ghosts, territorial spirits, fertility, and the mediatory power of water (Kodesh 2004, 31 and 46). The attention and power afforded to snakes by locals at the centre of Catholic Buganda was thus at direct odds with one of the key visual messages of the missionary medal.

As Jonathon Earle further explains, in both the pre- and late-colonial periods pythons, like other animals and life forms, played important roles in the local political imagination and 'possessed special meaning in Buganda's cultural registers' (Earle 2018, 387). By the mid-twentieth century the snake had also become pivotal to the visual and rhetorical approach of particular anticolonial and anti-Catholic activists in Buganda such as Kigaanira Ssewanyana Kibuuka. Kibuuka was a self-styled prophet who rebelled against his strict Roman Catholic upbringing in 1930s Buddu, and declared war against the colonial state (Earle 2018). Kigaanira declared himself 'compelled to find a political ally among Buganda's pythons' and wore a python around his neck in reference to the precolonial version of the Bemba tale, and as a call to return to the moral order of the precolonial period. Serpents therefore held an important if evolving position in Kiganda epistemology across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet on the European miraculous medal the serpent lies crushed at Mary's feet, thus presenting a conflicting visual narrative about the spiritual power and value of the snake. The image of the serpent on the miraculous medal would have surely been a jarring one for its viewer, speaking to paradoxical concepts of authority, identity, gender, and reproduction that were circulating in Buganda, and specifically Buddu, at this time. If the image has been actively omitted or rubbed this would provide an interesting window on local adaptations of Catholic practice. The undeterminable snake on this necklace highlights the value of close material and visual analysis, and offers an important prompt for further investigation into the portrayal of the snake on other medals.

## 12 The Luganda Text

Another deviation from the European medal is the text surrounding the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is here written in the Luganda vernacular. A survey of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European miraculous medals in most of the major European museums suggests that European medals mainly used French but sometimes Latin vernacular. A small number of medals have also been found to contain Chinese, Hawaiian and Syriac characters. This necklace appears to be the only one of its type yet found that incorporates an African language.<sup>38</sup> What is the significance of this use of Luganda text?

Aylward Shorter argues that between 1892 and 1914 the Catholic Church was largely inflexible regarding the language that it deployed for liturgical practices. As far as public worship was concerned, Shorter suggests, missionaries were still bound by the Church's liturgy, which was always in Latin, and there was no official liturgical scope for African vernacular, arts, or symbols (Shorter 2006, 166).<sup>39</sup> This medal offers an alternative perspective and supports more recent research by Deogratius Kyanda Kannamwangi about the critical importance of the Luganda vernacular to the indigenization of Ugandan Catholicism (Kannamwangi, 25–29). While the written word was something that was imported from Europe, the use of Luganda vernacular made this object into something with potentially new meanings.

Indeed, the Luganda translation of this medal reads differently from the French Daughters of Charity medal and translates as follows: *Ai Maria wazalibwa nga tolina kibi ky, okusoka otusabire fe abadou kira gy oli (Dear Maria you were born when there was sin forgive us)*. Another miraculous medal in the British Museum from China contains another slightly different translation: 'Mary conceived in your mother's womb without original sin, pray for us who seek your protection'.<sup>40</sup> Although the differences may appear small, the variation between the translation of this medal's text and those that are in European languages (*O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee*) is important. Timothy Manarin's unpublished thesis on the translation of the Bible into Luganda helps us to understand why. Manarin notes that biblical translations 'undergo continual revision to better reflect the ways a language is actually spoken and commonly understood' (2008, 10). In Buganda, translation 'forced [missionaries] to take the risk of putting their message and texts into realms they did not control or even fully understand' and opened the door for 'indigenous cultural criteria and the opportunity to reshape or reinterpret the message' (Manarin 2008, 10). While the exact significance of the miraculous medal's translation is difficult to decipher, the process of translation certainly

created space for reinterpretation of the intended missionary message into something with new local relevance.

### 13 Intangible Elements

The question also remains whether the text, and indeed the medals themselves, were forged locally or created at the French motherhouse for global adaptation in missionary fields. This is an important question first, because we know that the Daughters of Charity believed that it was essential that medals were made at the motherhouse so that they could be blessed, and second, because metallurgy was a highly spiritual and ritualised process in Buganda. The possibility of these medals being Kiganda creations forces us to ponder not only what subtle physical and visual amendments the maker may have chosen to make, but also what intangible, unseen forces they may have embedded within them, thus fundamentally diluting their European sense of 'Catholic-ness'.<sup>41</sup>

Unfortunately the museum archive does not record whether the medals were produced in France or Uganda, nor do missionary records explicitly state whether any medals were sanctioned for production outside of France by the motherhouse. Shorter argues that in Uganda 'the liturgical arts in the early years depended almost entirely on European imports. Vestments, statues, sacred vessels, linen: all came from abroad; being laboriously carried in the caravans from the coast' (Jensen 2017, 167). In 1896 Father Prendergast addressed the home readers of *St. Joseph's Advocate*, requesting donations of crosses, rosaries, and medals (Prendergast 1896a). Later editions of the magazine demonstrate that readers responded to Prendergast's request with donations of medals. For example, the 1896 Annual Report listed four donors who each gave multiple medals specifically for Uganda (*SJA Annual Report for 1896*). Subsequent editions show that donations continued over the following months. However, as useful as such gifts were, they would not satisfy larger requirements.

Moreover, secondhand donations of medals from parishioners in Britain would have presumably been cast with French rather than Luganda text. The medals on the British Museum necklace were thus likely cast in Uganda as part of one of three potential scenarios. The first option is that the medals were sent to Uganda with only the image, the intention being that the local vernacular would be added in situ. The second is that the medals were sent to Uganda in their complete form, but the original French text was removed and replaced once there. The final option is that the whole medal was cast and decorated in Uganda. It is not inconceivable that these and other medals were produced wholly in Uganda since, according to *St. Joseph's Advocate* magazine

in 1883, Mill Hill missionaries in India ordered local 'heathen' medals to be melted down and recast into Catholic ones:

Missionaries in India are accustomed to induce their converts to have their heathen medals melted down and turned into Christian ones. The love of having pictures, medals, etc., of beings, whom they respect, is natural and commendable. It is only because the objects of their respect are objectionable ... that the medals of them must be destroyed or turned into ones that direct their thoughts aright.

No author given, *SJA* 1883, 247

Missionaries in other colonised regions did make use of local craftsmen for the production of Catholic medals. Although missionaries sought to exert power over indigenous religious images, symbols, and objects by melting them down, we do not know what invisible acts of agency these craftsmen embedded within them in their reconfiguration work. The same idea could be applied to medals from Uganda where late nineteenth-century European and Ganda observers noted that there were skilled metalworkers who would have been able to work and reconfigure imported brass.<sup>42</sup>

The complex questions and answers about where this necklace and its constituent parts were produced, and how it was used and understood by its owner(s) force us to think in more nuanced ways about what constituted Catholic material culture and indeed Catholicism itself in colonial Buganda. Provenance investigation indicates that there are many important layers, both physical and metaphorical, to this necklace. The assemblage of its constituent parts represented the active reflection and response of one particular individual to a rapidly changing religious, political, and social world. This intermediate response drew on local and foreign images, materials, and metaphors.

## 14 Conclusion

Analysis of the miraculous medal has long been a Eurocentric one, yet as the textual, visual, and material sources in this article demonstrate, the miraculous medal also played important roles in societies far beyond Europe. In Buganda it served dynamic functions for Catholic missionaries. It physically assisted in different stages of conversion, including catechism and baptism, and also helped in the circulation of missionary ideology and propaganda about identity, race, gender, reproduction, and family life through its imagery, its conspicuous and inconspicuous positioning on the body, and its carefully curated presence in missionary photography. However, the Baganda were not

simply passive consumers of miraculous medals as the missionary sources otherwise suggest. Drawing on locally produced sources and an actual miraculous medal (or rather assemblage of miraculous medals and other elements) from Buganda in this study has allowed me to illuminate and incorporate some local perspectives and experience into the narrative as well. The medal was introduced at a time of radical religious, political, and cultural change in Buganda. The owner of this particular object responded to this change by positioning it alongside indigenous materials that had strong symbolic value prior to the arrival of European Catholicism. It is likely that the owner of this necklace also drew on preconceived ideas about the images, symbols, and materials embedded within the miraculous medal from origin stories, oral tales, and local shrines. Its adaptation into a new necklace gave it a new set of religious, social, political, and economic meanings that was different from the medal originally produced by the Daughters of Charity in Paris, and demonstrates the dynamism with which the miraculous medal, and Catholic material culture more widely, should be understood.

Today the necklace is a museum object with a fractured historical record that does not fully convey its past evocations and active participation in multiple areas of Ganda and missionary life. It is clear that deeper provenance research can help us question and reframe the often-misleading colonial records and classifications that were once placed on African museum objects and that continue to define them today. Scholars must look beyond the Eurocentric viewpoints of these classifications. Through this article I have shown the much richer picture that can be achieved for our understanding of both miraculous medals and the history of Catholicism in Buganda, and have also contributed to the ongoing work of scholars who are providing much more nuanced histories of Catholic material culture and museum collections from regions outside of Europe.

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## Notes

- 1 It is important to note that object-based studies of 'religion' have a much longer history. From the eighteenth century British imperial expansion expanded object collecting practices previously established during the Renaissance. Europeans assembled and studied global objects of belief and worship for information about the wider world and their position within it. The emergence of anthropology as a new scientific discipline in the later nineteenth century added new dimensions to the study of world religions as anthropologists organized 'religious' objects on an evolutionary scale of development, often regardless of the diverse understandings or uses of their original owners, and always placing European practices and beliefs at the peak. The study of objects was pivotal to this framework. After losing favour in the 1920s to functionalist anthropology and its emphasis on the observation of human social relations, object-centred study of religion reemerged in the 1970s and 1980s, albeit with a much more critical postcolonial lens than its problematic Victorian forerunner.
- 2 On the micromateriality of missionary activity see Comaroff and Comaroff (1997). On the arrangement of the missionary and indigenous home see Cleall (2012). On missionary collecting see Jacobs et al. (2015). On the creation of Christian art in Africa see Kuster (2016) and Fromont (2014).
- 3 For an overview of the wider discussions about conversion, missionary imperial hegemony, and African agency see Maxwell (2006).
- 4 For example, see Tan (2002). In her analysis of early modern Kongo Christian art, Cecile Fromont (2014) challenges the postcolonial language of entanglement and hybridity, and instead constructs the concept of 'space of correlation' as a more suitable theoretical framework. For research that touches on the material cultures of polyontology see McIntosh (2009).
- 5 The main missionary group operating in northern Uganda at this time was the Verona Fathers.
- 6 My main sources for the missionary part of this article include: *Les Missions Catholiques* held in the John Iliffe Papers at the Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide, University of Cambridge; *St Joseph's Foreign Missionary Advocate and Record of Life and Suffering in Heathen Lands* at St Joseph's Society Missionary Society Archives; the Missionary Postcards collection at Yale University Divinity School Library; the White Fathers Collection in the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian Institution; and the *Peres Blancs* (White Fathers) Photographic Albums in the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art (n.b., this latter archive relates to present-day Rwanda and Burundi and so has been utilized here for wider context rather than actual sources).
- 7 In her research on Catholic political radicals of the late colonial period Carol Summers also shows that 'Catholics in Buganda were not apolitical, obedient members of an inchoate mass' and that they 'sought to make the Church serve their needs and their God' (2009: 64).
- 8 See also Mugambi (1989).
- 9 For a helpful summary of these debates see Peterson (2012, 6–11).
- 10 Henri Médard (2007, 407–411) also argues that syncretism was essential for the success of the conversion process.
- 11 For example see Rowe (1969, 17–40).
- 12 At the same time, I note the comment of David Maxwell, who builds on Andrew Porter, that different Catholic missionary groups and congregations 'produce[d] very different patterns of Christianisation'. Thus the material activities of the White Fathers and Sisters

- in Uganda were different, for example, from the mendicant Catholic monks – the first missionaries to evangelise northeast Zimbabwe – who ‘eschewed the paraphernalia of modernity, travelling with only a stick and a Bible’ (Maxwell 1999, 385).
- 13 Based on a survey of 705 miraculous medals held in the collections of the British Museum.  
 14 In 1880 the author Lady Georgina Fullerton translated Labourer’s vision, providing greater  
 15 Lisa Gosden also suggests that ‘standardized objects may have been a significant factor in  
 16 regulating religious expression and experience’ (2015, 265) during the nineteenth century.  
 17 O’Brien (2017, 212) refers to the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in  
 18 1854 as giving new status to an already-traditional belief about Mary.  
 19 All *MC* references in this article refer to the translated copies of French magazine, *Les*  
 20 *Missions Catholiques*, in the John Iliffe Papers at the Cambridge Centre for Christianity  
 21 Worldwide, University of Cambridge.  
 22 For an overview see Oliver (1952).  
 23 For transport difficulties see Rockel (2006).  
 24 Lisa Gosden (2015) notes that nineteenth-century Europe itself witnessed a revolution in  
 25 the production and market for Catholic ecclesiastical furnishings. Clearly an examination  
 26 of this boom could also be extended to include non-European colonies.  
 27 ‘Necklace’, Church Missionary Society collection, Af953,24.22, British Museum.  
 28 See box titled ‘Mothers’ in the White Fathers Collection at the National Anthropological  
 29 Archives, Smithsonian Institution.  
 30 Wall touches on hierarchies of race and class in the female missions (2015, 13).  
 31 Here I draw on Sally M. Prome’s (2014) analysis of late nineteenth-century chalkware  
 32 Madonnas and the postural demands that they demanded of viewers – particularly chil-  
 33 dren – in photographs.  
 It is important to note that significant indigenous female Catholic missionary groups also  
 emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century, such as the *Bannabakira Sisters*  
 who were established in 1910. However, they were not accorded the same transcendental  
 image in the visual archive as their white sisters. This author has yet to find evidence to  
 show how/if the Bannabakira Sisters engaged with the medal. However, such evidence,  
 when it is found, will further complicate the colonial archival narrative.  
 For another missionary but non-Catholic perspective on the sartorial techniques of mis-  
 sionaries see Eves (1996).  
 Henri Médard (2007, 409) has also suggested that medals were associated with political  
 factions in Uganda.  
 A website titled ‘Old East Africa Postcards’ collates a number of interesting postcards cre-  
 ated by the White Fathers and Sisters and other Catholic missionary groups operating  
 across eastern Africa. [https://www.oldeastafricapostcards.com/?page\\_id=5185](https://www.oldeastafricapostcards.com/?page_id=5185).  
 For more on this style of photography see Morton and Edwards (2016, 267) and Edwards  
 (1990, 235–258).  
 For example, see an example from Rwanda in *Peres Blancs* (White Fathers) Photographic  
 Albums, EEPA 1987–010, Album 1, 18. ‘Boy holding basket and a man, posed in front of  
 bamboo backdrop’; and 19. ‘Four boys posed in front of bamboo backdrop’.  
 Further research into the archives and sources of Stanislas Mugwany (Catholic Chief  
 of Buganda Kingdom during Kabaka Daudi Chwa’s reign); Bishop Joseph Kiwanuka  
 (Archbishop of Rubaga, 1960–1966); and Alikisi Ssebowa (a Catholic leader in the early  
 civil war and Buddu’s *ssaza* chief) is required.  
 I would like to express my thanks to Jonathon Earle for his efforts in compiling this archive  
 and kindly providing me with these references.  
 However, Pierre Petit’s recent (2020) analysis of the sculpture of Our Lady of Congo offers  
 a new window on local agencies by highlighting how the strong imagery of race and

- African slavery embedded within the statue was off-putting to local audiences, and in fact led to a distinct lack of engagement with imported Catholic art even under the restraints of nineteenth-century colonialism.
- 34 According to early European visitors the smelting process was often kept hidden and sacred from European eyes. See Reid and MacLean (1995, 146).
- 35 Noted by Speke and referenced in Reid and MacLean (1995, 146). See also Sasson (1983, 93–106).
- 36 Objects belonging to members of the Lango, Madi, Luo, Karamojong, and Wakedi can be found in the collections of the British Museum.
- 37 Jonathon Earle refers to Christian ophidiophobia in Uganda in Earle, 'Political Activism', 386.
- 38 Joe Cribb, former Keeper of Coins and Medals at the British Museum, has found examples in Chinese and Hawaiian characters (Cribb 1981, 1–13). Pierre Petit, researcher at the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research, has also found an example in Syriac.
- 39 Catholic missionaries were increasingly recording and publishing printed works in African vernacular languages by the late nineteenth century, and Leon Livinhac and Simeon Lourdel devised a Luganda dictionary soon after the missionary arrival in Buganda (Shorter 2006, 155). Summers also notes that by the 1910s many Baganda catechists taught a Latin and Luganda curriculum (Summers 2009, 66).
- 40 I would like to express my thanks to Abiti Adebo Nelson, Curator of Ethnography and History at the Uganda Museum and PhD student at the University of Western Cape in Cape Town, for translating this text and discussing the medal with me.
- 41 When considering the concept of 'affect' as a category of study for precolonial eastern Africa, including the study of metallurgy, Kathryn M. de Luna's work has been a particular influence on this article. See de Luna (2013, 123–150).
- 42 The Ganda skill in metalwork was noted in the British colonial commissioner's report of 1897. The report was reprinted in *St Joseph's Advocate*, Spring Quarter, 1897, 196. John Roscoe (1911, 383) describes Ganda craftsmen working with imported brass and copper, and Apolo Kagwa lists some of the head smiths of different counties (1934 [1905], 160).