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Negotiating Professional Identity: The Formation and Practice of Midwives at the Lady Coryndon Maternity Training School

Abstract

This research examines how the professional identity of Buganda midwives was constructed at the Lady Coryndon Maternity Training School (MTS) at Mengo Hospital between 1919 and 1937. The professional identity midwives were expected to project reflected the “moral” womanhood promoted by missionaries, distinguishing them from local populations. While previous scholarship has largely viewed midwifery programs as instruments of colonial control that imposed a static, missionary-defined identity, this study emphasizes the active role midwives played within a professional framework. The study employs archival research and textual analysis of patient notes from 1919 to examine the language of authority in midwifery care, investigating how medical interactions were documented and the terminology used by midwifery students. Additionally, architectural analysis will be used to assess how the design of the MTS building influenced midwifery as a professional role, considering how its spatial organization and physical layout reflected colonial intentions. Photographs from the 1930 Child Welfare Photography Exhibition will be analyzed to explore how midwifery was visually constructed in imperial discourse, including depictions of midwives in uniform and patient interactions. By integrating these methodologies, this research not only highlights how midwives were shaped by colonial frameworks but also demonstrates their active roles as practitioners. This study provides a foundation for future research on the influence of Buganda midwives on medical practices and patient experiences in colonial Uganda.

Introduction

At 7:30 p.m. on August 12, 1919, Buganda midwifery students Susana Nansikombi and Miereiri Namakula attended to Abraki Sajali at the Lady Coryndon Maternity Training School (MTS) at Mengo Hospital. Three days earlier, Abraki had suffered a miscarriage and remained in severe pain. Her family carried her from Natete to the hospital, a journey of over an hour. Upon examination, Susana and Miereiri identified the cause: a retained placenta, a rare but serious condition. With just one year of training, they

successfully removed it, allowing Abraki to recover over the following days. This case highlights the expertise midwifery students developed and their role in maternal care within expanding colonial medical systems.¹

I pieced together this story using patient notes from the first cohort of students at the MTS. Building on cases like this, my research examines how the professional identity of Buganda midwives was formed at the Lady Coryndon Maternity Training School at Mengo Hospital from 1919–1937.² I will explore how the professional identity of midwives was constructed and negotiated across different spaces by analyzing the language of authority in patient records, the architectural and institutional framework of the Lady Coryndon Maternity Training School, the visual representation of midwifery in exhibitions, and the expansion of maternal care through rural logbooks.

The MTS was the first of many colonial midwifery programs throughout sub-saharan Africa in the 1920s. Existing scholarship largely frames these programs as instruments of colonial efforts to convert and "civilize" local populations. Colonial nations during the interwar period were particularly concerned with depopulation, and in Africa, depopulation was seen as a result of immorality. Much of the existing scholarship on colonial midwifery has focused on the ways in which colonial programs, such as the MTS, imposed a fixed, missionary-defined identity on local populations. Scholars like Megan Vaughan (*Curing Their Ills*) have emphasized how missionaries perceived African health practices, particularly in relation to venereal disease, as a moral failure that needed reform. Vaughan's work highlights how missionary medicine aimed to replace indigenous healing practices with a Western, individualistic approach to health, reinforcing colonial ideals.³ Similarly, Nakanyike Musisi's work on the MTS argues that the program sought to create moral exemplars of womanhood through midwifery training, aligning women's roles in society with missionary ideals of family structure.⁴ Nancy Rose Hunt, in her analysis of maternity healthcare in the Belgian Congo, demonstrates how missionary medicine disrupted existing reproductive practices, such as birth spacing, and introduced new systems that aligned

with colonial priorities.⁵ These studies collectively address how colonial medicine reshaped social structures and gender roles, particularly in relation to women's reproductive health.

Methodology

While this work is important to understand the missionary prescriptions of morality it depicts these women as mere passive subjects of colonial control, neglecting the role as practitioners midwives played despite these interventions. Understanding the MTS as a site where midwives actively engaged with their profession, rather than as passive recipients of colonial training and expectations, shifts the focus from a static view of their roles to one centered on interaction. This shift is essential for moving scholarship beyond discussions of missionary influence to recognizing the influence of the midwives themselves. Recognizing that the MTS aimed to professionalize midwifery provides a framework for future research to examine the various levels of interaction within this role, including relationships with patients, colonial authorities, and local communities, while allowing for differences in individual experiences over time. This approach then creates space to consider patient perspectives on missionary medicine and how midwives were perceived within both the colonial system and their communities.

This research employs archival research, textual analysis, and visual and architectural analysis to examine the professionalization of midwifery at the Lady Coryndon Maternity Training School (MTS) in colonial Uganda. Institutional records, patient notes, logbooks, and administrative reports from archives such as the Wellcome Collection, the Church Missionary Society Archives, and Makerere University's Albert Cook Library will provide insight into how midwives were trained, how their authority was documented, and how they navigated their roles within both colonial and local contexts. Patient notes from 1919 will be analyzed using textual analysis to explore the language of authority in midwifery care, considering how medical interactions were documented and what terminology was used, as well as imagining what these interactions may have looked like in practice.⁶ Logbooks from 1924 to 1937 will be used to trace the expansion of midwifery training beyond urban centers, mapping the movement of midwives, patients, and administrators in rural maternal health initiatives.⁷ Administrative records and funding appeals from 1921 to 1937 will illuminate the material conditions of training, colonial oversight,

and local engagement with midwifery education.⁸ Visual and architectural analysis will be used to examine both the representation of midwives in photographs and the physical design of the training institution. Photographs from the Child Welfare Photography Exhibition in London will be analyzed to understand how midwifery training and maternal care were visually framed in imperial discourse, including depictions of midwives in uniform, clinical settings, and patient interactions. Additionally, architectural analysis of the MTS building itself will consider how its spatial organization shaped midwifery as a professional role, reflecting both colonial intentions and how Baganda women engaged with the space.⁹ By integrating these methods, this study will offer a multi-faceted understanding of how midwifery was professionalized in colonial Uganda, considering both the institutional structures that shaped midwives' training and practice and the ways in which they actively engaged with and navigated these roles.

Timeline

From March to June, I will focus on preliminary research by reviewing scholarship on medical middle figures, African medical assistants, and colonial healthcare while analyzing the 1919 patient notes currently available. This period will also involve refining my research questions, developing a framework for textual analysis, and preparing for archival visits by coordinating access to materials at the Albert Cook Library, the Church Missionary Society Archives, and the Wellcome Archives. In July, I will conduct two weeks of archival research, beginning in Kampala, Uganda, where I will obtain patient notes from 1920 and 1921, study administrative reports and correspondence, and conduct an architectural analysis of the Lady Coryndon Maternity Training School. I will then travel to the UK, visiting the Church Missionary Society Archives in Birmingham and the Wellcome Archives in London to locate additional institutional documents, correspondence, and photographs. August and September will be dedicated to organizing and analyzing archival materials, conducting visual and architectural analysis, and drafting sections on the language of authority in midwifery training, the spatial design of the MTS, and representations of midwifery in exhibitions. By October, I will complete a full draft of my thesis,

incorporating feedback from my research advisor, Professor Neil Kodesh, and revising based on peer and faculty input. In November, I will finalize my thesis, ensuring coherence and clarity while refining my argument. By December, I will submit my thesis and use it as a writing sample for graduate school applications, reflecting on my findings and considering future research directions on patient experiences and perceptions of colonial medicine.

References:

1. Albert Cook Library, Lady Coryntyn MTS, Patient Notes, 1919.

Vaughan, Megan. "Syphilis and Sexuality: The Limits of Colonial Medicine Power." *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness*, 129–155. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991;

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Jubilee Book of Mengo, 1947.

