



Kyama M. Mugambi. *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya.* Waco: Baylor University Press, 2020. 348 pp. \$54.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4813-1355-1.

Reviewed by Paul G. Grant (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

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Commissioned by David D. Hurlbut (Independent Scholar)

In the concluding pages of *A Spirit of Revitalization*, Kyama M. Mugambi takes his readers through central Nairobi on a Sunday morning in 2018. Within a tight radius of five hundred meters, a colorful diversity of living congregations collectively represents the history of Christianity in Kenya as European-initiated and African-initiated movements alike hold their services. “This small area in Nairobi,” Mugambi says, “acts as a microcosm of African Christianity,” not only in urban Kenya but in many other places around the continent (p. 287).

Mugambi presents twenty-first-century Kenyan Pentecostalism as heir to four distinct phases of East African Christian history: nineteenth-century European missions, early twentieth-century African-Initiated Churches, the East African Revivals of the late colonial years, and the postcolonial emergence of a newer form of Pentecostalism that reconfigured legacy, missionary-era Pentecostalism for the distinct experiences and spiritual needs of the educated, urban middle class. Drawing on all four of these threads, a movement of “Progressive Pentecostal Churches” (PPCs) began emerging in the 1990s, confident and unconcerned with European and American opinion. The cumulative impression is one of rooted cosmopolitans—both Kenyan and Christian—capable of strategically and critically engaging with the world on their own terms.

The core of Mugambi’s research is a lengthy list of oral interviews conducted over several years. These conversations make the book. Mugambi’s interlocutors sometimes confirm, sometimes complement, and sometimes contradict conventional wisdom. The author treats his sources fairly but not uncritically, and a cumulative image of a raucous but vivacious church culture begins to appear.

Holding it all together is the author’s steady and disciplined approach. *A Spirit of Revitaliza-*

tion is meticulously plotted in a sequence of at times overlong chapters. After an introduction that frames the book as a globally significant local study, eight chapters follow in groups of two: chapters 1 through 4 as a historical narrative, and chapters 5 through 8, in turn, as sociological profiles.

Chapter 1 is concerned with the African-Initiated corrective to missionary Christianity, which the author calls Spirit-Roho churches. These autochthonous movements reconfigured a foreign religion to suit indigenous sensibilities and meet indigenous needs; while Mugambi does not trace a genealogical line from these churches to twenty-first-century PPCs, he stresses their rootedness in African orality as a shared feature.

The second chapter turns to the well-researched East African Revival. Mugambi is conversant with the scholarship while emphasizing a few original points, the foremost of which is that “the key to understanding the Revivalists lies in their creation of a cross-cultural Christianity within a context where monocultural religious expressions were the norm” (p. 63).

Chapters 3 and 4 narrate two distinct postcolonial Pentecostal expressions. The variety that was first established in Nairobi had come from Canada in the early and mid-twentieth century, but in most cases had become fully nationalized during the 1970s and 80s. Mugambi distinguishes between these “Newer Pentecostal Charismatic Churches”—an imprecise category he glosses with an acronym (NPCCs) and discusses in chapter 3—and the PPCs, the subject of chapter 4. All told, the differences between the two are neither doctrinal nor ontological but social and organizational—an argument developed in the subsequent two chapters.

Chapter 5 focuses on modes of “discipleship” in urban Kenyan Pentecostalism—the process by which these churches, having rejected historic mission churches’ Europe-derived catechisms, have taught their youth and their converts the

fundamentals of faith and praxis. Chapter 6 is about leadership: how new leaders have been identified, developed, and equipped, especially as Kenyan churches of all expressions, including the mission churches, have fully nationalized their leadership structures in the last four decades.

The final dyad of chapters applies the foregoing historical and sociological arguments to case studies of two large networks: Christ is the Answer Ministries (chapter 7) and the Nairobi Chapel (chapter 8). These twin chapters constitute the core of the book and are convincing and compelling; each of the two congregations appears here as globally minded and locally rooted (Mugambi uses the word “glocal” sparingly).

A Spirit of Revitalization is perhaps the most important book on contemporary African Christian history to be published in the last few years. The book’s descriptive agenda—the reformulation of a transnational religion into a rapidly evolving urban social situation in a booming country—is always difficult, demanding an author’s facility in the literatures and methodologies of multiple disciplines, principally history and theology. Few scholars pull it off perfectly: even the late Lamin Sanneh struggled to reconcile those fields in *Translating the Message* (1989; 2nd ed., 2008). Readers familiar with the questions and arguments of the Yale-Edinburgh Group on World Christianity and Princeton Theological Seminary’s World Christianity conferences will recognize much of the theoretical framework here, especially the intellectual fingerprints of Sanneh, Andrew Walls, and Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu.

In elegantly subordinating theological interventions to concrete historical facts, Mugambi offers a model for research in world Christianity that thinks globally and eternally while retaining the messy inconsistencies and contingencies of human lives. Written with all the strengths of an insider who can speak to transnational theoretical debates, *A Spirit of Revitalization* is rich in ground-level detail while remaining conversant in

current interventions from Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere in Africa. Mugambi rewards careful readers: several of his keenest observations and conclusions are either buried in the middle of long paragraphs or in discursive footnotes. The latter function as repositories for unsupported (but never incredible) arguments, usually drawn from decades of personal experience.

In his 2010 African religious travelogue, V. S. Naipaul described a similar religious scene in Uganda in distinctly pessimistic terms. “Foreign religion,” Naipaul wrote, “to go by the competing ecclesiastical buildings on the hilltops, was like an applied and contagious illness, curing nothing, giving no final answers, keeping everyone in a state of nerves, fighting wrong battles, narrowing the mind.”[1] Naipaul’s caustic dismissal of millions of African Christians, as if they were hapless intellectual recipients of noxious alien ideologies, proceeded from an a priori contempt for religion of any sort: Naipaul could not conceive of African reconfiguration of an originally foreign religion as anything but false. Writing from Kenya, Mugambi sees things differently: where Naipaul saw wrong battles, Mugambi sees new solutions; where Naipaul saw no final answers and a narrowing of the mind, Mugambi saw “a fresh Christianity reimagined within particular cultural, historical, and social contexts” (p. 296).

A Spirit of Revitalization seems to occupy a different universe than Adriaan van Klinken’s *Kenyan, Christian, Queer* (2019). Almost mutually exclusive lists of names and congregations appear in the two books’ indexes, although the two authors are arguing in a similar direction: that twenty-first century Kenyan Christianity is a robust ecosystem, un beholden to European leadership or American money. Whereas Klinken’s approach is ethnographic, complicating the story of East African Christianity caricatured in Naipaul’s 2010 book or Roger Ross Williams’s film *God Loves Uganda* (2013), Mugambi’s goal seems to be to invite church leaders in Europe and North America

to listen and learn from Kenyan innovation: he names several examples of large American churches and networks receiving Kenyan Christian training material, and others hiring Kenyans as pastors. *A Spirit of Revitalization* is imperative reading both for scholars of African religion and world Christianity.

Note

[1]. V. S. Naipaul, *The Masque of Africa* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 6-7.

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