

## SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

# Theorizing the African Postcolony: Epistemology, Power, and Identity

**Eric Lindland.** *Crossroads of Culture: Christianity, Ancestral Spiritualism, and the Search of Wellness in Northern Malawi.* Luwinga, Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2020. viii + 632 pp. List of Maps. Bibliography. Index. \$55.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-9996060410.

**Gwyneth H. McClendon and Rachel Beatty Reidl.** *From Pews to Politics: Religion Sermons and Political Participation in Africa.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xiii + 286 pp. List of Tables. List of Figures. References. Index. \$39.99. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1108486576.

**Kyama M. Mugambi.** *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya.* Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2020. xviii + 348 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$54.99. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1481313551.

When read together, these three books offer a theorization of the African postcolony—at least, this is the way I chose to read them. We get a glimpse of the connections between the dimensions of epistemology, power, and recognition (identity) and how they define or contour religio-political existence in the African postcolony. The three books collectively demonstrate how indigenous epistemology, notions of power and the political, and the understanding of social identity are keys to unraveling the intimate links between religion and politics in sub-Saharan Africa.

Each of the books focuses primarily on one of these three dimensions and either leaves the other two in its shadow or treats them as secondary. Eric Lindland's *Crossroads of Culture* digs deep into the matter of epistemology but is silent on politics; Gwyneth H. McClendon and Rachel Beatty Reidl in *From Pew to Politics* engage politics but largely ignore the spiritual epistemology that drives the political in Africa; and Kyama M. Mugambi in *A Spirit of Revitalization* expertly analyses the African Christian identity, but he is surprisingly silent on epistemology and the indigenous notion of power. As I will demonstrate, reading each of them with the consciousness of what is left unsaid enhances a better grasp of the imbrication of politics and religion

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(specifically Christianity) in Africa. My explication of both the said and the unsaid will highlight what it means to be a Christian in today's Africa.

At the heart of Lindland's *Crossroads of Culture* is an intervention into the debate about what actually defines Christianity in Africa. The book's rich anthropological studies—plenty of theoretical ruminations and an abundance of excellent ethnographical data—demonstrate how generations of Tonga, Tumbuka, Ngoni, and others in Malawi explore and define the intersection between ancestral spiritualism and Christianity. “They are engaged in an effort to define and realize a Christianity that, rather than being an exotic Christianity that will never take vital root, is instead a Christianity that is authentic to their lived experiences and embodied memories as Africans” (589). The key to discerning the resistance to “exotic Christianity” is their imaginings about the relationship between body and spirit that exists in each person.

This book explores how Christians in Malawi model the body and spirit as parts of being and personhood for religious and healing practices. These Christians, working from an ontology that does not separate the material world from the spiritual, believe that ghostly spirits and ancestors can inspire the knowledge of healing herbs and practices. Their moral imaginings about bodies and spirits were grounded in a monistic (not dualistic) ontological schema, which is a pattern of thought that predated the mission culture in Malawi. In this ontology, being or personhood is seen as a conjunction of body and soul (spirit). Spirit and body are not separated, but rather they exist in mutual participation in every human being. The author sets the indigenous model of personhood and being into conversation with Livingstonia Christian missionaries' model of intellectualized soul and a despiritualized organic body (mind and body). The missionaries' model, built on the foundational Christian schema of body and soul as the only relevant ontological reality, was driven by modern western epistemological commitment to science and physical phenomena. The Protestant Christian model of body, mind, and spirit also informed the Livingstonia missionaries' practice of organizing their mission work around three institutions: hospitals, schools, and churches. In their discursive practices, churches serve the purpose of transforming souls, hospitals of healing bodies, and schools of educating minds.

There were problems with this conjunction that informed the way mission stations were organized, and it had a profound impact on how missionaries understood African personhood because, “Both the linguistic practice of differentiating among body, mind and spirit as constituents of being, and the institutional and architectural practice of building separate structures to mediate events for the body, mind, and spirit, suggested a substantial degree of conceptual compartmentalization among the three facets” (3). This western conceptual framework rejected any spiritual component to illness, while the Africans recognized fundamental, irremovable connections between the spirit world and the phenomenological world of living bodies. Thus, the African converts differently organized and mobilized the resources of

Christianity to serve their integrated world, a way based on an ontology that saw human and non-human agencies, physical and spiritual beings, as mutually participating in human flourishing.

*Crossroads of Culture* offers in-depth descriptions and analysis of the disjunction between the missionary model of personhood and that of the Malawian Christians. Lindland examines how the Malawian Christians responded to the Livingstonia model, opposed it, integrated it, or otherwise related the two disparate systems within their individual and collective lives. Were the Malawian Christians successful in integrating the tripartite missionary institutional framework into their discourse, thinking, and practice? Lindland also asks, “to what extent have the Livingstonia missionaries been successful in institutionalizing their religious and scientific models of personhood and being in the customs and rituals practiced among Malawi’s northwestern residents? (7).

Lindland uses the answers to these questions to set up a structural comparison between indigenous forms of spirituality and therapy and mission Christianity and biomedicine. In the process, he investigates the operations of a tripartite ontology of knowledge, faith, and practice among the local Malawian Christians. The comparison comes to optimum clarity in the case studies of two sick local Christian men desperately trying to understand the etiology and meaning of the chronic illnesses that afflicted them. Their faith was not driven by the post-Enlightenment model of faith through doctrinal knowledge. Their practices of morality did not proceed from an individual commitment to the church’s body of knowledge that anchors moral or sacred personhood. These converts fashioned for themselves an African-Christian form of healing practices that combines ancestral spiritualism, divination, Christian faith, and biomedicine. “When bodily crisis strikes, many [Christians] in the region continue to invoke and enact models of body-spirit relations that, though often highly syncretized with both Christianity and biomedicine, are nevertheless grounded in foundational schemas of African, not European derivation” (585). The author takes readers deep into how the healing practices were forged, offering an example of how two sick men and their relatives reflected on their Christian faith, how such faith was transformed, and the struggles of each of these men as they found themselves caught in intersecting webs of two religious and therapeutic traditions (knowledge systems).

In the process of elucidating the two cases, this fascinating and brilliant book offers innovative discussions on conversion and syncretism. These discussions contest Jean and John Comaroff’s notions of the hegemonic and “colonization of consciousness.” This is to say, Lindland rejects the idea that the foundational orientations used among African converts (in places such as Tswana) to navigate their worlds were subsumed under missionaries’ structures of understanding, as the Comaroffs argue (*Of Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. 1, 1991). Relative to the Comaroffs’ thesis, Lindland asserts “that the early European missionary project in northern Malawi has in key respects failed in its hegemonic intent. For as long as many of the core

assumptions of ancestral spiritualism continue to resonate among residents in Embangweni, as in elsewhere in the region, and continue to guide and shape their lived experiences, any Western hegemonic project will remain incomplete” (588).

This difference between the various studies conducted in different countries in the continent necessitates investigating lived religion rather than assuming that there is a unified response to mission Christianity. This difference also makes an argument for not treating Christianity as singular, transhistorical, and transcultural. Gwyneth H. McClendon and Rachel Beatty Reidl avoided these pitfalls in their pathbreaking book, *From Pew to Politics: Religion Sermons and Political Participation in Africa*. Sermons in African churches differ on how they answer questions about causal attribution and the possibility of change. Different churches think differently about the connections between faith and material change (70). McClendon and Reidl investigate how sermons in African churches “activate and reactivate world views that influence how people make sense of political questions, problems, and opportunities (63). Tracking sermon differences across churches and denominations, they discern that as the contents of the sermons address deep existential and metaphysical issues, the mundane earthly problems they impact influences the levels and modes of political engagement of the church goers (63).

There is a remarkable difference both in sermon content across churches and in the influence they exert. Generally, sermons of Catholic and mainline Protestant churches differ from those of the Pentecostal churches. These two broad groups tend to engage in distinctive forms of political participation. Despite variations in political-strategic environments, Pentecostals generally tend to focus on personal transformation as the route to social or systemic change. The Catholic and Protestant churches press for large-scale structural reforms. This difference is traceable to the religious messages these churches deliver from their pulpits (230).

*From Pews to Politics* is the finest book I have read on religious-political influence in sub-Saharan Africa in a long time. Through careful context-specific, empirically grounded analyses and sophisticated theoretical architectonics, McClendon and Reidl demonstrate that sermons change how Christians (listeners of sermons) participate in politics and respond to political scenarios (232–35). They state that “ordinary citizens turn to sermons for guidance around deep questions about how the world works. Through sermons and other forms of communication, religious associations communicate a metaphysical understanding of the world. That metaphysical understanding of the world need not be political, required, or coercive. Instead, because it shapes listeners’ understanding of cause and effect, of causal attribution and of human agency, it can also shape how citizens respond to political problems and opportunities, at least, in the short run. The influence of religion as metaphysical world view can be catalyzed into political action if opportunities are presented just after citizens are exposed

to the sermon, or its influence can be recharged through repeated exposure to such ideas” (236).

Individuals are most influenced by in-group sermon messages when social identity cleavages coincide with religious teachings (242–45). How does religious revitalization, renewal movements that either narrow or broaden social identity, redefine the ideas that create world images, and reinterpret the cultural forces that mold socio-economic interests affect Christian participation in politics or response to political scenarios? Kyama M. Mugambi offers answers to this question in his book, *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya*. The response comes in the form of the author’s tracing various kinds of conversion and revitalization experiences which extend the notion of kinship beyond the inherited understanding of kinship and ethnicity in Kenya. Christians in Kenya express kinship by valuing Christian brotherhood (siblinghood) “above ethnic affiliation, at least when it came to religion” (59). Moving from the “spiritual churches” named as Spirit-*Roho*, to revitalization energy within historic mission churches, and finally to the Newer Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (NPCCs), the author demonstrates how Kenyan churches attempt to create a society that stresses allegiance to Christ as a way to transcend ethnic boundaries—that is, to create multiethnic, multicultural inclusive churches, especially in the urban areas (25, 56–57, 59). Kenyan Pentecostal Christianity has forged a spiritual identity beyond the national boundaries to embrace a global community of believers. Kenyan Pentecostals see themselves as a part of a global community while at the same time promoting a sense of individual identity and community ties within the local church. “Implicit in Pentecostal thinking [is] the awareness that the church is a global community. They [recognize] that their churches [are] like all others around the world in their history, mission, and destiny. Theological differences, unless fundamental, were not reason enough for fractious encounters” (295). In this global interconnection, they see themselves as sharing resources for the good of the global church—as recipients and as active participants.

*A Spirit of Revitalization* enables us to interpret Christian participation in politics or response to political scenarios in two important ways. The two ways relate to social identity and self-recognition, and a broad understanding of the political in Africa. As Akinsola Akinwowo demonstrated years ago, there is an interaction between the African kinship system (*ajobi*, consanguinity) and sharing same “shelter” (*ajogbe*, kinship, relationships not based on bloodline in the urban area). The knitting together in *ajogbe* is social and religious, ever adapting to changing local conditions. (Akinsola Akiwowo, *Ajobi and Ajogbe: Variations on The Theme of Sociation* [Inaugural Lecture Series 46, University of Ife Press, 1980]). The fictive kinship ties of *ajogbe* speak to the larger transnational kinship and friendships that constitute the global body of Christ, which is always a play of the mutually reinforcing ethos of *ajobi-ajogbe* relations. Politics in this sense is about negotiating the moral values around this tension of *ajobi-ajogbe* relations in the forging of social identity. This is evident in the author’s description of how churches in Kenya have interacted with

foreign Christians over time and space as they have forged their emerging African Christian identity. “Each successive wave of indigenous Christians fostered a different kind of engagement. Spirit-*Roho* Christianity was keen to forge its own spiritual identity, actively widening a chasm between themselves and historic church missionaries. Revivalists adjusted their engagement based on the missionary’s compliance with their own strict understanding of Christian fervency. NPCCs formed relationship of evangelistic convenience with their American counterparts. Understanding the import of this relationship for evangelism and the growth of Pentecostalism in the 1990s requires a nuanced approach that retains the focus of evangelistic agency where it belongs, with the indigenes” (295).

This brings us to the implicit concept of the political that is operative in this book. While the author of *A Spirit of Revitalization* does not directly address politics as McClendon and Reidl do in *From Pews to Politics*, there is an implicit concept of the political in the book. This oblique concept of the political is similar to what Lindland explores in *Crossroads of Culture*. What do I mean by the political here? The political is the common coexistence where being and *being-with* (being togetherness) are always at stake. Politics is ultimately about living well, men and women living well in the commons. The political is “the site where being in common is at stake,” and “having access to what is proper to existence, and therefore, of course, to the proper of one’s own existence” (Christopher Fynsk, foreword to *The Inoperative Community*, by Jean-Luc Nancy [University of Minnesota Press, 1991], pp. x, xxxvii). Thus, all political actions (words and deeds) are really about our being-in-common; and what is always at stake in this *in-between* where we are *ex-posed* to one another is the character of possibilities of life. Always and above all, this boils down to the actualization of potentialities of both individuals and community in sub-Saharan African countries.

The three books under review in this essay collectively offer us a robust perspective on how to theorize faith and politics in the African postcolony to better understand their imbrication. As per this perspective, the African postcolony is a site of interplay of three desires (epistemology, power, and recognition), as Africans seek ways of improving their levels of human flourishing. These three desires cut across contextual differences in different African social milieus.

First, there is the desire for knowledge, the desire to understand the physical existence or to produce knowledge through the technology of invisible, spiritual forces, to pierce the phenomenal veil over reality and to access the noumenal realm for knowledge that can enhance human flourishing. Spiritualized epistemology gives Africans an alternative imagination to constitute or reconstitute reality, to grasp the truth, and for self-governance (Nimi Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism* [Rochester University Press, 2014]).

The second is about power, and it is clearly intertwined with spiritual epistemology. The possession and deployment of power is the key to extracting and allocating resources from the *commons* needed to live a full human life. Politics is a process of power-exchange, akin to warfare with clear,

concrete definitions of friends and enemies. The political is an agonistic struggle for power between people, who are powers of being. Politics is marked by agonistic strivings and tensions for entitative and nonentitative powers. The processes and sites for the struggles of the political are presumed to be pervaded by spiritual presences. The spiritual is the inner dynamics of politics in all spheres of society and public life (Nimi Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism* [University of Rochester Press, 2014], pp. 145–65). For Africans, politics is a mode of power of being.

Finally, there is a desire for a certain type of recognition. What I am calling recognition here is about social identity. African Christians hold within themselves forms of dual identities: a new internal-subjective identity as God's children, divinely ordained into the global body of Christ, along with the old external-objective identity of ethnicity. There is also the dual identity of allegiance to African culture and traditions and that of a purportedly contextless global Christian culture. These forms of identities coexist in the same persons or largely within the same group of believers. Two agencies are joined in one human body (or body politic). The tension of two agencies existing in one body contributes to the creativity and vibrancy of African Christianity. As Mugambi remarks in his brilliant and painstaking book, *A Spirit of Revitalization*, "creating new expressions of Christianity was both a creative process and a curation of existing material" (288).

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