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978-1-107-02116-7 - Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent,
c. 1935–1972

Derek R. Peterson

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

The Pilgrims' Politics

It is August 1949, and several thousand people have gathered at Kabete, in central Kenya, to work on their autobiographies. They are converts of the East African Revival, a Christian conversion movement that began in northern Rwanda in the mid-1930s. The Kabete gathering is a cultural and linguistic hodge-podge: most in the congregation are Gikuyu people, but there are Luo men and women from western Kenya, Swahili speakers from the Indian Ocean coast, and a few Maasai women. A missionary takes a photograph. In blurred outline it shows people leaning forward, some on their knees. They think themselves to be on the cusp of a new life. 'Come, let us reason together,' reads the biblical text on the banner behind the speakers' platform. 'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow.'¹ These people are practicing forensics, contrasting the past with the future, and creating life histories. 'Imagine at the end of the day member after member of the audience coming forward, making confession of sin, and relating what Christ has done for him,' wrote a missionary observer.

Some of these, men and women known to be devout, are received quietly. The signature chorus of the revival is sung, and there is an occasional word or handshake from those nearby. Others known or felt to be insecure or partial in their witness are received in silence or by the singing of a hymn enjoining them to seek salvation. Still others, known to be careless or evil livers, whose witness rings true ... are received in scenes of great enthusiasm. People start to their feet, singing. They throw their hands into the air and crowd round the person, all trying to shake his hand. His relatives and friends embrace him.²

The convention at Kabete was an arena where techniques of self-accounting could be practiced and a forum for the creation of autobiographical narratives. It was a court of judgment. It was also a point of departure. Converts' testimonies could propel them into a new life.

¹ PCEA II/C/22: Martin Capon to Philip Mitchell, September 1949.

² Robert MacPherson, 'The East African Revival,' *Kikuyu News* 193 (September 1950).

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PHOTO 1. Kabete Convention, 1949. Photo by Gladys Beecher. Courtesy of the National Museum of Kenya.

Not everyone looked favorably on the revivalists and their self-propulsive testimonies. The British authorities who governed colonial Kenya worried about the aggressive character of revivalist preaching. Civil order seemed to be at risk. ‘A stirring of souls is excellent,’ wrote the District Commissioner shortly after the Kabete convention, ‘but a stoking of fires hidden far below the smiling exterior of the African pagan can only lead to bloodshed and great bitterness.’³ African political thinkers were likewise convinced that the Kabete autobiographers were troublemakers, undermining traditional standards of behavior. ‘Christianity is love, compassion without end, great patience, and great civility,’ wrote the newspaperman Henry Muoria in a Gikuyu-language pamphlet. ‘But when it’s taken to mean people confessing with their mouth, shouting loudly what they believe in and what others believe, such Christianity is what loud-mouthed and self-centered people conceive.’⁴ Muoria and other Gikuyu thinkers thought revivalists were advancing themselves at other people’s expense. ‘Anyone who says that he is joyful when many of our people are oppressed slaves and left in landless poverty is deceiving himself in the hope of the good things he will get in heaven when he is dead,’ wrote an editorialist shortly after the Kabete convention. ‘Men who help themselves get justice.’⁵ Patriotic men argued that Gikuyu people should work for the betterment of the commonwealth.

³ KNA DC Fort Hall 1/26: Fort Hall District Annual Report, 1949.

⁴ Henry Muoria, ‘What Shall We Do, Our People?’, in Henry Muoria, *Writing for Kenya: The Life and Works of Henry Muoria*, eds. Wangari Muoria-Sal, Bodil Folke Fredericksen, John Lonsdale, and Derek R. Peterson (Leiden, 2009), 147.

⁵ ACK ‘North Highlands Rural Deanery’ file: Extract from *Mumenyereri*, 9 December 1949.

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They sought to build a community whose manners and comportment was evidence of their capacity for self-government. In their view, revivalists were delinquent in their civic duty: their never-ending sermons destroyed concord, undermined social discipline, and fractured community.

In this book, I use the controversy over the Revival as a lens through which to explore the social history of dissent in eastern Africa. Since the publication of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* in 1983, the Cambridge University Library has catalogued 223 books with titles beginning with 'The Invention of.'⁶ A great variety of social formations – Somalia, Argentina, race, and religion, to name a few – have been shown to be constructs crafted by self-interested entrepreneurs, not holdovers from the distant past.⁷ The book was particularly influential in shaping the method of African cultural history, and there are now a number of studies showing how tribes – previously thought to be organic to African political life – were conjured into being.⁸ The constructivists have drawn the veil from the face of apparently timeless cultural practices, exposing their human origins and scrutinizing their claims to authenticity. But the constructivist literature makes it seem as though historical precedent was the only means by which cultural innovations could be authenticated. There is little space to consider how the inventors of tradition convinced doubting constituents to acknowledge a normative account of history as their own. Neither is there space to study interruptions in the onward march of historical time, eschatons, resurrections, or new eras. The 'invention of tradition' paradigm obliges scholars to focus on the small cadre of elites who identified ancestors, configured culture as heritage, and called new communities into being. It can do little to illuminate the logic of nonconformism.⁹

At Kabete, converts created solidarities outside the framework of cultural convention. Ethnicity in central Kenya, as elsewhere in eastern Africa, was a forum of argument, not an invented tradition to which people were obliged to conform.¹⁰ Revivalists and their patriotic critics spoke the same

⁶ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

⁷ Ali Ahmed, ed., *The Invention of Somalia* (Lawrenceville, NJ, 1995); Nicolas Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina* (Berkeley, 1991); Tommy Lott, *The Invention of Race: Black Culture and the Politics of Representation* (Malden, MA, 1999); A. A. Huemer, *The Invention of 'Race': the Columbian Turn in Modern Consciousness* (Lander, WY, 1998); Derek R. Peterson and Darren Walhof, eds., *The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History* (New Brunswick, 2002); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago, 2005).

⁸ The key text was Leroy Vail, ed., *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley, 1989).

⁹ Thomas Spear criticizes the constructivist literature on different grounds in 'Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa,' *Journal of African History* 44 (1) (2003), 3–27.

¹⁰ This is a thesis I derive from John Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty, and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought,' in Lonsdale and Bruce Berman,

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vernacular languages, but they constructed dramatically different accounts of history and positioned themselves differently in the social world. Morally conservative patriotisms were being formed all over postwar eastern Africa, as men came to feel themselves responsible for women to whom they were not directly related. Thousands of men were drawn to eastern Africa's cosmopolitan cities, where they were enclosed within a competitive, masculine world. Searching for means to generate social capital and prove their merit, men set to work creating institutions that would uphold social discipline and protect their reputations as Gikuyu, Luo, Haya, Toro, or Ganda people. They invented or refurbished customary legal codes, founded tribal welfare associations, wrote inspirational history, conducted anti-prostitution campaigns, and constituted nativisms. These self-interested activists constructed political community as a *patria*, a fatherland, rooting people in place as inheritors of their ancestors' instructive customs and traditions. Revivalists would not comport themselves as patriotic sons and daughters of the soil. Converts thought of themselves as pilgrims on the road toward another home. They were drawn together by their mastery over certain forms of self-presentation. In venues like the Kabete convention, they learned how to document their sins, describe their conversions, and chronicle their movements toward another life. Revivalists were inveterate travelers, avid users of the post office, and eager participants in the evangelical media. By attending cosmopolitan gatherings like the Kabete convention and through the exchange of autobiographical correspondence, revivalists came to see themselves as part of a large, transcontinental community of fellow travelers.

Seen through the eyes of eastern Africa's conservative reformers, converts were dangerous: they were displaced, unattached, and uncommitted to their natal communities. Revivalists willfully ignored the lessons that history taught about comportment, gentility, and respectability. Whereas patriotic organizers taught their constituents to behave with discipline and decorum, converts gossiped endlessly about their private lives. Patriotic organizers sought to impose discipline on troublesome converts. In north-western Tanganyika, northern Rwanda, and southern Uganda, local government authorities barred converts from speaking or singing in public. In western Kenya, Luo patriots founded a church that they called the *Johera*, the 'People of Love,' as a rebuke to antisocial, aggressive revivalists. In central Kenya, the earnest patriots of the Mau Mau movement promised to fight for *wĩathi*, for social discipline and self-mastery. Revivalists were their leading antagonists.

Scholars have said very little about the field of argument that revivalism generated. The historiography of the Revival has very largely been composed

Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa (London, 1992), 315–504; and restated in Lonsdale, 'Moral and Political Argument in Kenya,' in Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh, and Will Kymlicka, eds., *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa* (Oxford, 2004), 73–95.

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as hagiography.¹¹ African converts were avid producers of autobiography (see Chapter 9), and some testimonies found their way into print in circular letters, newspapers, or books. There are now dozens of books published by evangelical presses that present revivalists' biographies as evidence of God's work in eastern Africa.¹² Bundled together between the covers of the book, it is easy to lift converts' earnest testimonies out of the polemical context in which they were composed. The back cover of one such collection invites readers to 'sense the freedom from bondage to heathen practices as [God's people] prove by their lives the God of the Bible to be the only true God.'¹³ Packaged in this way, converts' autobiographies become inspirational literature, placeless, anodyne affirmations of the universal truths of Christianity.

In *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, I disassemble the books published by evangelical presses, rip revivalists' testimonies out of their earnestly inspirational milieu and place them in the rhetorical context in which they were composed. Revivalists' autobiographies were subversive literature. Converts offered a contentious reading of their contemporary world: they sorted through cultures and traditions, identified their sins, disavowed their pagan contemporaries, and fashioned new lives for themselves. Their autobiographical work took place within a discursive field in which other entrepreneurs were also working over the past. In eastern Africa's several *patriae*, political entrepreneurs were identifying the historical grounds for moral discipline and creating ethnic homelands. On this political field converts acted as subversives, willfully upsetting the order of tradition. They were dissenters on the field of etiquette, manners, and social convention – a field that patriotic organizers sought by all means to regiment. Whereas patriotic men sought to confine constituents to a particular

¹¹ The most important exception is Catherine Robbins' excellent but unpublished dissertation 'Tukutendereza: A Study of Social Change and Sectarian Withdrawal in the Balokole Revival of Uganda' (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1975).

¹² Herbert Osborn, *Pioneers in the East African Revival* (Eastbourne, 2000); Osborn, *Revival: A Precious Heritage* (Eastbourne, 1995); Osborn, *The Living Legacy of the East African Revival* (Eastbourne, 2006); Osborn, *Revival: God's Spotlight* (Crowborough, East Sussex, 1996); Festo Kivengere with Dorothy Smoker, *Revolutionary Love* (Fort Washington, PA, 1983); Edith Wiseman, *Kikuyu Martyrs* (London, 1958); Colin Reed, *Walking in the Light: Reflections on the East African Revival and its Link to Australia* (Victoria, 2007); Patricia St. John, *Breath of Life: The Story of the Ruanda Mission* (London, 1971); Bill Butler, *Hill Ablaze* (London, 1976); Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Clouds of Witnesses: Christian Voices from Africa and Asia* (Downer's Grove, IL, 2011). African converts have published their own conversion stories: see Obadiah Kariuki, *A Bishop Facing Mount Kenya: An Autobiography, 1902–1978* (Nairobi, 1985); Festo Olang, *Festo Olang: An Autobiography* (Nairobi, 1991); and John Gatui, *Joyfully Christian, Truly African* (Nairobi, 2006). Church historians are using this biographical literature to explain the changing demographic complexion of world Christianity: see, for example, Mark Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, IL, 2007).

¹³ Dorothy Smoker, *Ambushed by Love: God's Triumph in Kenya's Terror* (Fort Washington, PA, 1993).

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homeland, converts lived on the road. Whereas patriots promoted vernacular languages as a mark of ethnic solidarity, converts were cosmopolitans, learning a variety of tongues. Whereas patriots sought to cultivate ties of love and affection among their ethnic confreres, converts composed their life stories in relation to an international ecumene. And whereas patriots shaped their constituents' manners to accord with traditional norms, converts comported themselves without reserve.

In the study of the Revival, we can see religious conversion in a different light: not as an inward reorientation in religious conviction, but as a political action that opens novel paths of self-narration, constitutes new ways of living, and unsettles the inventions of tradition. Conversion was a form of political and cultural criticism.

GENEALOGIES OF CONVERSION

The emphasis in scholarly writing about Christianity in Africa has been on continuity, on the underlying structure that guided Africans' engagements with 'world religions.' In theology, as in anthropology and history, the old religion is conceived as a foundation, establishing the symbolic and discursive categories through which Africans interpreted Christianity. As Joel Robbins has shown, the model is based on a homogenized conception of time in which change is conceived not as an event but as a perpetual process.¹⁴ Even where converts describe the process of becoming Christian as a radical transformation in their lives, scholars see it as their task to uncover the continuities that link converts with their native religions and cultures.

This way of thinking about religious history is to a large extent derived from Protestant missionaries' evangelistic strategy. Missionaries sought to build on the old religion, not to supplant it.¹⁵ Their model was the Apostle Paul's discourse at the Areopagus at Athens, described in Acts 17. In his homily, Paul offered a definition for the 'Unknown God,' a character who the Athenians had hitherto worshipped in ignorance. Paul gave this character a history (he 'made the world and all things therein') and an identity ('in him we live, and move, and have our being'), and then invited his listeners to repent of their sins. For the Anglican divine Christopher Wordsworth, whose 1857 commentary on Acts was read widely by his British contemporaries, Paul's speech at Athens was 'the model and pattern to all Christian missionaries for

¹⁴ Joel Robbins, 'Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity,' *Current Anthropology* 48 (1) (February 2007), 5–38.

¹⁵ Argued in Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY, 1989); and in Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY, 1996). There were exceptions to this generalization: German Pietists, for example, thought the spirits of Ewe cosmology to be satanic. See Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Trenton, NJ, 1999).

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their addresses to the heathen world.¹⁶ With Paul's example before them, Protestant missionaries set out to identify, name, and preach about unknown Gods. Through this work they established the architecture of the old religion and related the new Christian religion to the vernacular vocabulary.

Christian missionaries in Africa were therefore the first systematic theologians of traditional religion.¹⁷ The earliest missionaries in central Tanganyika lamented the poverty of the Gogo vernacular language. 'They have no idea of the purity of God or of that righteousness which is essential to a person becoming a member of his Kingdom,' wrote the Anglican missionary J. T. Last in March 1881. 'They have no literature, or any traditions likely to lead their minds to discover a higher state of righteousness.'¹⁸ But in August of that same year, Last began to compose a dictionary. He ruled a notebook in parallel columns, with English at the left side and Gogo at the right. Then he 'wrote down what I thought were the most suitable [English] words from A to Z in their proper places, and then, as I found the native words I had only to put them down in the places allotted to them.'¹⁹ In their dictionaries, missionary linguists imposed an order on the intransigent vernacular. Four handwritten English-Gogo dictionaries have survived in the archives.²⁰ On their pages, missionaries established correspondences between generic religious concepts and Gogo words. 'God' was *Mulungu*. 'Believe' was *-ihuwila*. 'Sacrifice' was *-ikumbiko*. With the vocabulary aligned on the page, missionaries found it easy to appreciate the Gogo religion. 'Their language is remarkably complete; their traditions are such as to amply repay the time and effort required to master them; while their parables and tribal laws are assets of no mean value,' wrote one missionary.²¹ In 1902, the long-serving missionary Henry Cole published an essay on the Gogo in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*.²² He was guided by the 'Ethnological Questions' that the Cambridge anthropologist J. G. Frazer had circulated in the course of his research for *The Golden Bough*.²³ 'Do

¹⁶ Christopher Wordsworth, *The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ: In the Original Greek* (London, 1857), 86.

¹⁷ Argued in Paul Landau, '“Religion” and Christian Conversion in African History: A New Model,' *Journal of Religious History* 23 (1) (February 1999), 8–30; and in David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville, 1996).

¹⁸ CMS G3 A5 O: J. T. Last to Hutchinson, 18 March 1881.

¹⁹ CMS G3 A5 O: J. T. Last to Whiting, 8 August 1881.

²⁰ DCT 'English Cigogo Dictionary,' n.d. (labeled 'Canon Hugh Prentice and Dr. Dorothy Prentice'); 'Cigogo Vocabulary,' n.d.; 'English-Cigogo Dictionary,' n.d.; 'Cigogo Dictionary,' n.d.

²¹ T. Westgate, 'The Home of the Wagogo,' *Church Missionary Gleaner* XXXCI (1909).

²² Henry Cole, 'Notes on the Wagogo of German East Africa,' *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 32 (1902), 305–38.

²³ Published in J. G. Frazer, 'Questions on the Manners, Customs, Religion, Superstitions &c. of Uncivilized or Semi-Civilized Peoples,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (1889), 431–40. See J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London, 1890), xxx.

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they practice magic or witchcraft?,' asked Frazer. 'Do they think that human beings have souls?' 'Are sacrifices offered?' Henry Cole answered each question in turn by describing Gogo 'sacrifices,' documenting Gogo views on the 'soul,' and charting their conception of the afterlife.

Missionaries like Cole identified a terminology and a set of practices that could be named as an indigenous religion. Once the linguistic and theological foundation was in place, missionaries could compare the old religion with the new revelation. In 1886, while traveling through Gogo country, the missionary J. C. Price met with a group of elders who inquired after his purpose in visiting them.²⁴ 'I have come into Ugogo only to tell you something you do not know about the God who gives you food, rain, life and strength, for His Son came down from heaven,' Price declared. Price was taking a Gogo term – *Mulungu*, 'God' – and placing it within a Christian framework. When someone asked Price how to pray to God, Price told him to 'go and speak to God alone, away from everybody else.' Missionaries established a novel set of practices by which Gogo people could relate to a God whom they had hitherto known only distantly. The work of theological consolidation always involved a process of selection. When someone asked Price about *uganga* – which the dictionaries defined as 'witchcraft' – and *nkumbiko* – the 'sacrifices' that Gogo people made to their ancestors – Price told him that 'they were all no use – he was simply to pray, to speak to, God.' Edited in this way, the old religion became a *preparatio evangeli*, setting up the vocabularic and intellectual structures with which the Christian gospel could be preached.

In the 1960s, the decade of Africa's political independence, a generation of African theologians returned to the dictionaries and anthropological studies that missionaries had composed, using them as evidence with which to reconstruct the logic and character of African Traditional Religion. They were driven by pressing political concerns. African nation-builders were busily sorting out their cultural property, identifying legal codes, languages, musical genres, and styles of dress that were authentically African.²⁵ Theologians, too, worked to build the nation. The Kenyan theologian John Mbiti was appointed lecturer at Makerere University's Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy in 1964. As a matter of urgency, he established a new course on 'African Religions' and in 1969 published his lecture notes under the title *African Religions and Philosophies*.²⁶ He had

²⁴ The material in this paragraph comes from CMS G3 A5 O: J. C. Price to Lang, 1 February 1886.

²⁵ Kelly Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago, 2002); Andrew Ivaska, *Cultured States: Youth, Gender, and Modern Style in 1960s Dar es Salaam* (Durham, NC, 2011); Jean Allman, ed., *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* (Bloomington, IN, 2004).

²⁶ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York, 1969). An assessment of Mbiti's work is in Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang, eds., *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti* (Berlin, 1993).

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missionaries' dictionaries open before him as he composed his lectures. Like Protestant missionaries, Mbiti sought to illuminate the logic of the old religion, casting African Traditional Religion as an integrated system of rituals and symbols that paralleled Christianity. With the vocabularic evidence before them, Mbiti and his contemporaries argued that, prior to Christian missionaries' arrival, Africans had already known God.²⁷ Their foreknowledge made it easy for Africans to fold their traditional ideas about divinity into missionaries' monotheism, making African Christianity an extension of the old religion. In Mbiti's 1975 *Introduction to African Religion*, 'conversion' does not even appear in the index.²⁸ Mbiti and his generation of religion scholars agreed that conversion was of little consequence. Africans, argued the Kenyan theologian J. N. K. Mugambi, 'do not have to choose between being Christian and being African. They can be both Christian and African at the same time.'²⁹

The anthropological study of African religion developed alongside the enterprise of African theology, and, like the theologians, anthropologists emphasized the continuities joining old religions with new religions. Robin Horton's seminal essays on 'African conversion' set the agenda.³⁰ For Horton, conversion to a monotheistic religion, whether Christianity or Islam, was not a rupture between one way of life and another. Conversion was an organic social process through which Africans rearranged the elements of traditional cosmology. Africans had once lived in a microcosmic world, argued Horton, where religious practice focused on local tutelary spirits. Ideas about the macrocosmic, overarching Supreme Being were vague and unformed. With the advent of the modern world – the enlargement of scale, the improvement of communications, and the rise of nation-states – Africans were obliged to develop a code for the governance of wider life. They therefore clarified their hitherto unformed ideas about a Supreme Being, and some converted to one of the 'world religions.' Horton's thesis helpfully linked the study of religious change to the study of politics and economy. But like the theologians, Horton and those who followed him were disinterested in converts' consciousness. They preferred to focus on the material, political interests that prompted Africans to convert. For the anthropologist John Peel, the most pertinent questions were 'Why conversion occurred when it did (rather

²⁷ Mbiti's contemporaries included E. Bolaji Idowu, whose *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London, 1962) and *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London, 1973) had a profound effect on the field.

²⁸ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Portsmouth, NH, 1975).

²⁹ J. N. K. Mugambi, *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi, 1989), 22.

³⁰ Robin Horton, 'African Conversion,' *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 41 (2) (1971), 85–108. See also Robin Horton, 'On the Rationality of Conversion, Part I,' *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 45 (3) (1975), 219–35. For criticism, see Humphrey Fisher, 'Conversion Reconsidered,' *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 43 (1) (1973), 27–40.

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than earlier or later) ... why it attracted the social categories that it did, why it moved through the society in the way that it did ... or why it created the disruption that it did (relative to comparable other places).³¹ In his foundational *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, Peel argued that converts' criteria of judgment were necessarily drawn from their 'prior cultural repertory.' Because these purposes had guided converts' decisions to convert, they were 'likely to continue as a substrate of the new beliefs and practices, whatever novelties may inhere in or follow from the fact of conversion itself.'³² In Peel's view, the basic impulse guiding Yoruba people's engagements with the Christian religion was the search for power and prestige. 'To be really attractive, an identity must be such that people can see themselves adopting it without too much of a break with previous social commitments ... as well as one promising greater power,' he argued.³³

The theologians' account of African Traditional Religion has been subjected to a welcome critique, first by the Ugandan intellectual Okot p'Bitek and later by John Peel, Paul Landau, and Rosalind Shaw.³⁴ But the emphasis on continuity persists in historical and anthropological writings about religious change in Africa. The project is to show how contemporary African Christianity grows out of older cultural forms, how Africans domesticated a religious import, as the title of a recent book puts it.³⁵ Religion scholars maintain that the things they study – symbols, logics, and power dynamics – are not readily subject to change. Culture, in this view, structures action and thought in such a way as to ensure that it will continually be passed on.³⁶ In Ogbu Kalu's recent textbook on African Christianity, there are twenty-five entries in the index under 'African theology' and none under 'conversion.' Even unorthodox revivalist movements, Kalu argues, embrace 'a certain sense of continuity with the traditional past, embedding African Christianity into the deep structure of all African traditional religions in spite of the varieties of names and symbols.'³⁷ Conversion does not appear as a subject of analysis in the long surveys on African Christianity authored by Adrian

³¹ J. D. Y. Peel, 'Conversion and Tradition in Two African Societies: Ijebu and Buganda,' *Past and Present* 77 (November 1977), 108–41; quote at 110.

³² J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington, IN, 2000), 216.

³³ Peel, 'Conversion and Tradition,' 132.

³⁴ Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi, 1971); Peel, *Religious Encounter*, chapter 4; Rosalind Shaw, 'The Invention of "African Traditional Religion,"' *Religion* 20 (1990), 339–53; Landau, '"Religion" and Christian Conversion'; and Peterson and Walhof, eds., *The Invention of Religion*. Paul Landau has developed his insights in his remarkable *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948* (Cambridge, 2010).

³⁵ Nicholas Creary, *Domesticating a Religious Import: The Jesuits and the Inculturation of the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe, 1879–1980* (New York, 2011).

³⁶ See Robbins, 'Continuity Thinking.'

³⁷ Ogbu Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria, 2005), 306.