

DEREK R. PETERSON, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: a history of dissent, c.1935–1972*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hb £62 – 978 1 1070 2116 7). 2012, 344 pp.

*Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival* shows admirably how productive it can be to revisit longstanding scholarly interests with fresh eyes. Some time ago, many studies of Christianity in Africa were guided by the assumption that African-initiated Christianity was to be seen as an expression of protest and a means of resistance to inequality, dominance and exploitation. It was only in the 1980s and 1990s that unease developed regarding the inflation of what was interpreted as constituting ‘symbolic resistance’, which led to critical reassessments of its status as an analytical concept.

Derek R. Peterson’s new monograph, aptly subtitled *A history of dissent*, involves a welcome, though largely implicit, intellectual confrontation with prominent themes in these earlier studies. Peterson takes meticulous account of the political, economic and socio-cultural particularities of regions in eastern Africa as diverse as western Kenya, northern Rwanda, north-western Tanganyika and southern Uganda, and traces the multifarious interconnections between these regions in the period between the mid-1930s and the early 1970s. In doing so, he paints a rich picture of the cultural-cum-political tensions between the ostensible nonconformity of converts to the East African Revival – a Christian conversion movement that began in northern Rwanda in the mid-1930s – and their African patriotic contemporaries, many of whom felt that morality and social discipline were being undermined by colonial land reforms, labour migration and prostitution.

Thus, in contrast to earlier studies in this field—many of which focused on conflicts between African Christians and the colonial state and/or nation-building processes in postcolonial Africa—*Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival* looks at the confrontation between nonconformist religionists and a diverse set of African political entrepreneurs in the years before and after political independence. The latter were not nationalists, but ethnic patriots with an interest in defending their respective (idealized) ‘homelands’. As Peterson demonstrates on the basis of archival materials and oral history interviews, these Gikuyu, Luo, Haya, Toro and Ganda nativists conducted ethnographic research in order to refurbish customary law, founded tribal welfare associations and engaged in anti-prostitution campaigns in urban centres. For these patriots, defending social discipline meant above all ‘rooting people in place as inheritors of their ancestors’ instructive customs and traditions’ (p. 4) and making them adhere to a clear-cut separation between the private and public realms of life, which they considered the foundation of social communality.

Yet the converts to the East African Revival did not conform to what the patriots (and, to a lesser extent, the colonial administrators) envisioned for them. They were unstoppably loquacious, putting their private lives on display during public testimonies about the sins they had committed in the past, and, in so doing, not just unveiling their own immoral deeds but, without asking, even those of other people who had been implicated in them (for example in adultery). Patriots and nonconformists thus differed markedly in how they positioned themselves in and moved through the social world: ‘Whereas patriots carefully managed their public appearance, converts paraded their private deeds for other people to examine. Whereas patriots edited their private lives, converts made a point of opening up about their sins. Whereas patriots sought to fix people in place, converts were pilgrims, journeying metaphorically and physically toward the outskirts of [their] society’ (pp. 193–4).

Following the introduction and a short chapter on how infrastructural developments in eastern Africa (such as post offices, newspapers, bicycles and roads) contributed to the diffusion of the East African Revival, each of the chapters in the book picks up on a specific historical context and facet of the interactions between nonconformists and their critics, paying close attention to the texts produced by these social actors, their biographies, the trans-regional discursive formations they drew on when making their respective arguments, and contests between regimes of different times. For example, focusing on the history of political power in Kigezi District (Uganda), Chapter 3 shows that nonconformist Christians resembled the mediums of the Nyabingi cult in that they ‘were alike in their resistance to the organizing conventions of territorial governance’ (p. 60). Chapter 5 sets out from the observation that ‘Evangelical Christianity borrowed its theory of accountability from contract law’ (p. 105) and argues that converts in the chiefdom of Bugufi (Tanzania) adopted bureaucratic techniques to sort through their deeds and possessions, first seeking personal guilt and then redemption through testimony and the restitution of stolen goods. In Chapters 6 and 7, Peterson explores the attempts of male Luo and Haya patriots in Kenya and Tanzania to restore ‘civil order’, which they saw as being threatened by both the converts’ non-compliance with standard etiquette and expressions of women’s independence, especially prostitution. Some of these attempts revolved around the idea of a patriarchal reform of family life according to (invented) traditions; others involved petitions to the colonial administration and the institutionalized control of women in urban centres. As Chapter 10 makes clear, such striving for control was even practised in Mau Mau detention camps in British colonial Kenya, where inmates took the findings of auto-ethnographic

research as the basis for social order within the camps and employed letter writing in attempts to influence home and community affairs from a distance.

In summary, this is an empirically rich, conceptually sophisticated and eloquently written book. Peterson succeeds in crafting a 'thick description' out of diverse archival materials, the analysis of texts by eastern African authors, and oral history testimonies from more than 170 interviews with witnesses to the East African Revival. Framed as a 'social history of dissent in eastern Africa' (p. 3), the book not only opens up new venues in the historical analysis of the co-production of trans-regional religious movements and nativist ideas, but also draws attention to the important role of modern bureaucratic and literacy practices in how African patriots sought to constitute 'traditional' African societies.

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