

WERBNER, Richard, *Holy Hustlers, Schism, and Prophecy: Apostolic Reformation in Botswana*, 268 pp., illustrations, notes, references, index, DVD. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. Hardback, \$60. ISBN 9780520268531.

Young male charismatics in urban Botswana—streetwise, smartly dressed when not on prophetic duty, using slang words, having a cell phone at hand even while conducting divinatory sessions—are the unlikely main protagonists in Richard Werbner’s new book, which is accompanied by a DVD.<sup>1</sup> Providing a welcome complement to recent anthropological research on Pentecostal mega-churches in Africa, Werbner develops a rich ethnography of the Eloyi Christian Church and its recent offshoot, the Conollius Apostolic Church, both of which are ethnically diverse, renowned for their dramatic performances of exorcisms, and rapidly growing in membership. The book examines how these charismatics engage with the church members’ quest for well-being and asks a question that is pertinent not only for

our understanding of African Christianity, but also for many other issues (such as humanitarian aid) that are explored by anthropologists: how can willful individualism and caring empathy co-exist in people’s engagement with others? According to Werbner, the answer to this question lies in explicitly taking account of long-standing concepts of personhood that inform how these charismatics enact their selves, alternating between a permeable, partible, and socially empathetic self (dividual), on the one hand, and a self (individual) that is autonomous, self-seeking, and self-interested, on the other.

How this ‘alternating personhood’ is acted out in African Christian practice is the topic of the first chapter, which provides a vivid *tour de force* through a range of aspects concerning the identity of the prophets, their interactions with those who seek help, and their routines in divination and healing. Werbner points out that these routines rely to a large extent on the prophets’ “sacred mimesis [that] serves their patient for reflection, for knowing an interior condition that the patient cannot otherwise grasp clearly” (p. 21). This mimesis is accompanied by a ‘double dialogue’ composed of two registers, the first an ‘interior monologue’ of the (divinely inspired) prophet in the sense of Mikhail Bakhtin, the second a ‘direct dialogue’ between the prophet and the patient. Yet, according to Werbner, this empathetic dialogism is just half of the story because, at other times, prophets can also be impatient and obtrusive, even to the point of subjugating patients who in different settings have a higher social status than themselves. It is partly due to the prophets’ domineering attitude in defamiliarizing what is taken for granted that patients, while not openly cross-examining prophets, often view them with suspicion and skepticism.

Having thus far introduced some central dimensions of the religious practice in the two churches, the second chapter takes up the classical Weberian theme of the relationship between ‘charisma’ and ‘institution’ in discussing the tense “working partnership” (p. 44)

between pastors and prophets. It also demonstrates, among other things, that church hierarchy is based on the pastors' control of the material means of spiritual transformation that are employed by the prophets during healing sessions, such as holy ash and water that has been prayed over. Werbner also argues that prophets are "devotional subjects," that is, "subjects around whom, in moments of ritual, a community of suffering emerges" (p. 50). In this way, the analysis of institutional structures and organizational forms is supplemented by perceptive observations concerning the symbolic construction of religious community through sacred empathy.

Following the third chapter, which, by means of case studies, highlights the diversity of the biographical backgrounds, vocational histories, action orientations, and performative styles of five young charismatics, the following two chapters (i.e., chapters 4 and 5) turn toward a multi-perspectival analysis of an institutional crisis that evolved along the fault lines of generational conflicts between father and son in a prominent family in the church leadership and that eventually led to the separation of the Conollus Apostolic Church from the Eloyi Christian Church. According to Werbner, this schism was due to a "moral crisis" (p. 83) and controversial processes of reformation by younger church leaders involving, on the one hand, innovations in the performance of prophets, who started to model the documentation of their divinatory sessions in accordance with bureaucratic procedures in biomedical hospitals, and, on the other hand, an appreciative reassessment of the role of the dead in Christian ritual practice. In contrast to previous anthropological research in the late 1980s and 1990s, which foregrounded the importance of African Christian resistance against, for example, state hegemony, Werbner makes it clear that this is a case of a church that "embraces the state in confidence and confidentiality" (p. 94). Resorting to litigation in Botswana's High Court, the churches lobbied to get official backing by the state.

Roughly following the temporal order of the prophets' religious routines, the first three chapters of the second part of the book (i.e., chapters 6, 7, and 8) explore prayer, diagnosis, and prescription, demonstrating sensitivity to semiotic and discursive dimensions and laying particular emphasis on the processuality of situated interactions between prophets and patients. For example, Werbner shows that 'faith' is considered a prerequisite for an effective prayer, understood as an "intersubjective act of care" (p. 129) aimed at the transformation of the person, while at the same time it is conceived as a precarious state that needs to be constantly monitored and reinstated. On the other hand, when discussing divinatory practices in relation to five case studies, the idea is powerfully conveyed that prophetic diagnosis does not simply follow a pre-given script but represents an uneasy mixture of artful persuasion and narrative "fumbling" (p. 149) in search of divine revelation. Finally, as regards prescription, Werbner draws attention to the fact that most material means of spiritual transformation employed by the prophets are part and parcel of modern consumer culture—they are fabricated, costly, mostly imported, and often come ready-labeled from the shops.

Entitled "Old and New in Christian Reformation," the ninth chapter, which reflects on the relationship between the ethnographic representation in the book and in the accompanying DVD, takes issue with classical (Sundkler) and recent (Robbins) approaches to change and continuity in anthropological studies of (African) Christianity. Being skeptical as regards "the question of totalizing Christianity itself" (p. 194), Werbner notes that generations differ in how they relate to things past: what was rejected by an earlier generation of Christians in (rural) Botswana does not automatically figure prominently in what is rejected by subsequent (urban) generations of Christians. For this reason, it is possible for later generations, such as the prophets of the Conollus Apostolic Church, to reassess the role of the dead in Christian practice and

come to appreciate the dead as powerful or even “desirable” (p. 181). But even more generally, in this chapter, as well as throughout the book, one finds an argument—backed by empirical evidence from different regions of sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Khoisan, Xhosa)—for cultural resilience; in other words, it is possible to demonstrate “axiomatic continuity” (p. 16) for some aspects of African Christianity, such as concepts of personhood.

While this argument is forcefully made and for good reasons contrasted with Thomas Csordas’s (1994) landmark study of the ‘sacred self’, its theoretical scope would have been broadened if more literature on dialogism had been consulted, for example, the work of sociologist Zali Gurevitch (2000), who describes a similarly oscillating movement in interpersonal dialogue. In addition, there is a contradiction between Werbner’s claim that Apostolic prophets present themselves as “active agent[s] in conversation with the Word and the angels” (p. 30) and the observation later in the book that prophetic references to the Holy Spirit “serve as disclaimers” in order to “externalize responsibility” (p. 133). This contradiction could probably have been solved by a more elaborate theoretical consideration of an aspect of utmost (yet implicit) importance in Werbner’s book, namely, ‘agency’.

These minor critical points aside, taken together, this book is a fine-grained, sensitive, empathetic, and thought-provoking ethnography, whose main empirical strength and great theoretical merit lies in questioning the conventional wisdom in anthropology and related disciplines that “Christianity itself ... places the individual and the salvation of the individual at the very center of the religion’s theology” (p. 202). By contrast, this book demonstrates that Christians in present-day Botswana are characterized by an ‘alternating personhood’ that implies that they are at times autonomous, at other times “partible, and permeated by others’ emotions and shared substances, including ... words” (p. 12). Thus, in focusing on concepts and enactments of

personhood, Werbner makes an important and innovative contribution to anthropology’s renewed interest (cf. Maxwell 2012) in the question, what makes a Christian?

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#### Notes

1. Due to lack of space, this review concentrates solely on the book and refrains from discussing the DVD.

#### References

- Csordas, Thomas J. 1994. *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gurevitch, Zali. 2000. “Plurality in Dialogue: A Comment on Bakhtin.” *Sociology* 34 (2): 243–263.
- Maxwell, David. 2012. “What Makes a Christian? Perspectives from Studies of Pneumatic Christianity.” *Africa* 82 (3): 479–491.