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## Conversion and the Alignments of Colonial Culture\*

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### Abstract

This essay – composed to honor *Of Revelation and Revolution* on its twentieth anniversary – argues that conversion was a means by which hegemonic cultural discourses were rendered subject to examination. The focus is on the East African Revival, a Christian conversion movement that began in Rwanda and spread throughout east Africa over the course of the 1940s and 50s. Following the directions given in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, revivalists sorted through cultural property, identified their sins, and set themselves in motion toward another world. Their path set them at a tangent from the dialectics of the colonial encounter. In the study of the Revival we can see conversion as a political action that unsettles the alignments of colonial culture.

### Résumé

Cet article, rédigé en l'honneur des vingt ans de *Of Revelation and Revolution*, montre que la conversion a été un moyen par lequel les discours culturels hégémoniques ont été soumis à examen. Le texte se penche sur le cas du Réveil est-africain, un mouvement de conversion qui commença au Rwanda et se répandit dans toute l'Afrique de l'Est durant les années 1940 et 1950. S'inspirant des orientations données dans le livre *Pilgrim's Progress* de Bunyan, les catéchistes du Réveil réorganisèrent leurs propriétés culturelles, identifièrent leurs péchés, et se mirent en route pour un autre monde. Leur cheminement les emmena sur un terrain situé à la marge de la dialectique de la rencontre coloniale. En étudiant ce mouvement de Réveil, on découvrira ainsi la conversion comme une action politique qui déstabilise l'ordre établi par la culture coloniale.

### Keywords

revival, conversion, hegemony, East Africa

### Mots-clés

réveil, conversion, hégémonie, Afrique de l'est

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\*<sup>1</sup>) This essay is part of a larger project shortly to be published by Cambridge University Press, provisionally entitled "Pilgrims and Patriots: Conversion and the Social History of Dissent in East Africa." Archival sources are referenced as follows: CoU: Church of Uganda archives, Mukono; CMS: Church Mission Society archives, Birmingham; CMS Oxford: Church Mission

## Introduction

I was introduced to *Revelation and Revolution* at the University of Minnesota, when my doctoral supervisor thrust the book into my hands. It has been with me ever since. In the 1990s Minnesota was an engine for the production of what E.P. Thompson called “history from below.” Heinemann Publishers’ “Social History of Africa” book series was edited by Minnesota faculty, and the ‘history from below’ approach pervaded our education. In scholarly writing and in the seminar room my fellow students and I learned to look for evidence of African agency, to place African voices at the center of the analysis, to recognize that colonial power was always met – whether openly or off-stage – with resistance. In this scholarly clime the Comaroffs’ book found few admirers. My fellow-students and I thought the Comaroffs made Tswana people out to be unthinking dupes. Our views were articulated by the South African historian Johannes du Bruyn, who remarked that in *Revelation and Revolution* “the missionaries are mostly the doers and actors, the Southern Tswana rather mute and often even unconscious recipients... The Southern Tswana do not emerge from this book as people capable of agency.”<sup>1</sup> With a group of graduate students and faculty I organized a conference in 1997 titled “Africans Meeting Missionaries: Rethinking Colonial Encounters.” In the concept paper we remarked that the Comaroffs had ignored how “African peoples not only were shaped by but shaped the colonial world.” Africans were “denied voice and narrative,” and “prefigured in an essentially reactive posture.” My cohort of graduate students had little time for the study of hegemony: we were thrilled by struggle, contention, and conflict. “Combat

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Society archives, Oxford; Murray papers: Jocelyn Murray archives, London Mennonite Centre, London; HMC: Henry Martyn Centre archives, Cambridge; NMK: National Museum of Kenya, Nairobi; KNA: Kenya National Archives, Nairobi; TNA: Tanzania National Archives, Dar es Salaam; KigDA: Kigezi District Archives, Kabale, Uganda; UNA: Uganda National Archives, Entebbe, Uganda; HDA: Hoima District archives, Hoima, Uganda; DCT: Diocese of Central Tanganyika archives, Dodoma, Tanzania; ACK: Anglican Church of Kenya archives, Nairobi; ELCT: Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania archives, Bukoba, Tanzania; MAM: Mid-Africa Ministry archives, Birmingham; BNA: British National Archives, Kew.

<sup>1</sup> Johannes du Bruyn, “Of Muffled Southern Tswana and Overwhelming Missionaries: The Comaroffs and the Colonial Encounter,” *South African Historical Journal*, Vol. 31 (Nov. 1994), pp. 294-309; quote at p. 308. See also Sherry Ortner, “Specifying Agency: The Comaroffs and Their Critics,” *Interventions*, Vol. 3 (1) (2001), pp. 76-84.

Zones” was one of the panel titles at the 1997 conference; “Struggles for Hegemony” was another.<sup>2</sup>

Twenty years after the publication of *Revelation and Revolution*, I can see how poorly founded some of our criticisms were. The vocabulary of social history has been transformed since the early 1990s, and we no longer think about agency, or voice, in the same way.<sup>3</sup> In any case the Comaroffs did have a great deal to say about Africans’ creativity, about their innovative, dynamic engagements with colonial power. The ‘long conversation’ – the term they used to describe the encounter between Nonconformist missionaries and Tswana people – was by no means a one-way exchange. At the very outset of their project the Comaroffs showed Tswana people to be engaged in refashioning the signifiers of colonial culture and putting them to “symbolic and practical ends previously unforeseen, certainly unintended.”<sup>4</sup> They emphasized that missionaries’ interaction with Tswana people was a “process of reciprocal determination,” an “encounter in which local and global forces, Africa and Europe, interacted on multiple levels and in subtle, polyphonous, mutually determining ways.”<sup>5</sup> The Comaroffs spent much of Volume Two documenting the variety of hybridized cultural forms that were generated by the colonial encounter. In architecture, in their clothing, in farming and in religion Tswana people brought European and vernacular forms together, creating novel styles that were both syncretic and modern. The dialectic of colonial modernity on this frontier, they argued, was a “mutually transforming play of social forces whose outcome was neither linear nor simply overdetermined.”<sup>6</sup>

Reading *Revelation and Revolution* today, I am struck by how much the Comaroffs shared with the historians who my graduate cohort admired. Like social historians, they looked for politics in the mundane transactions of daily life, and also like social historians, they emphasized Africans’ critical, creative

<sup>2</sup> Several of the conference papers were published in a special issue of *The Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 23 (1) (Feb. 1999), edited by Derek R. Peterson and Jean Allman.

<sup>3</sup> See David William Cohen, Luise White, and Stephan Miescher (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. One: *Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. Two: *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 28 and p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. two, p. 410.

engagements with colonial power. The book had a salutary effect on historians' research agendas. It invited us all to think more analytically about their research data, and it helped open the study of Christian missions as a field for scholars of colonialism to explore. In 1991, when the first volume of *Revelation and Revolution* was published, church history was a backwater in the wider current of Africanist scholarship. While there was some useful work published in the 1980s – Strayer's *The Making of Mission Communities in East Africa* and Beidelman's *Colonial Evangelism* stand out – the field was largely the province of church historians.<sup>7</sup> *Revelation and Revolution* generated a great deal of commentary: there have been at least four special issues of academic journals dedicated to the discussion of the book, and several substantial review essays have been published.<sup>8</sup> A great number of projects have been framed in conversation with the Comaroffs' work. At the 1997 conference in Minnesota there were papers from Paul Landau, Lamin Sanneh, Pier Larson, Barbara Cooper, Dorothy Hodgson, John Peel, Kathleen Smythe, John Lonsdale, Carol Summers, and myself. All of us have published books and essays that engage with *Revelation and Revolution*.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Robert Strayer, *The Making of Mission Communities in East Africa*, London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978; T.O. Beidelman, *Colonial Evangelism: A Socio-Historical Study of an East African Mission at the Grassroots*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> Special issues on *Revelation and Revolution* include the *South African Historical Journal*, Vol. 31 (1) (1994); the *American Historical Review*, Vol. 108 (2) (April 2003); the *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 23 (1) (February 1999); and *Interventions*, Vol. 3 (1) (2001).

<sup>9</sup> Paul Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom*, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1995; Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993; Pier Larson, "Capacities and Modes of Thinking: Intellectual Engagements and Subaltern Hegemony in the Early History of Malagasy Christianity," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 102 (4) (1997), pp. 969–1002; Barbara Cooper, *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006; Dorothy Hodgson, *The Church of Women: Gendered Encounters Between Maasai and Missionaries*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005; J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000; Kathleen Smythe, *Fipa Families: Catholic Evangelization and Social Reproduction in Nkansi, Ufipa, 1880–1960*, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006; John Lonsdale, "Kikuyu Christianities: A History of Intimate Diversity," in D. Maxwell and I. Lawrie (eds.), *Christianity and the African Imagination: Essays in Honour of Adrian Hastings*, Leiden: Brill, 2002, pp. 157–198; Carol Summers, *Colonial Lessons: Africans' Education in Southern Rhodesia, 1918–1935*, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002; Derek R. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya*, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004.

## Apologia

What is left to say about this much-discussed book? In this essay I suggest that historical anthropology ought to treat the life of the mind as seriously as life itself. By its structure and in its argumentation, *Revelation and Revolution* showed the colonial encounter to be “first and foremost an epic of the ordinary.”<sup>10</sup> The Comaroffs lent drama and coherence to their story of the mundane by making dynamic human interactions seem to be synecdochic for an epoch-making cultural clash. The book began by identifying the essential qualities of the two cultures under study: first came a chapter on “British Beginnings”, then a chapter on “African Worlds.” These two cultures were shown to be coherent and integrated: British discourses constituted a “tightly-knit cultural cloth, its internal pattern seldom unraveled.”<sup>11</sup> Missionaries were the emissaries of this modern world: they were the “human carriers of a hegemonic worldview,” the Comaroffs wrote. “Whether they knew it or not, they purveyed its axioms in everything they said and did.”<sup>12</sup> By identifying missionaries and Tswana people as representatives for whole cultures, the Comaroffs made it seem as if creative actors were working off a script, with their actions programmed in advance. Chapter Five explored the “initial meeting of two worlds, one imperial and expansive, the other local and defensive.”<sup>13</sup> This meeting of worlds is said to have taken place in 1813, when Rev. John Campbell entered the Tswana chief Mothibi’s town, set up a dining table, and supped before a watching crowd. In this and on other occasions the epochal encounter of cultures took place on mundane terrain: in missionaries’ gifts of mirrors and soap; in the irrigation ditches they dug; and in the square houses they built.

A number of historians focused their criticism of the Comaroffs’ work on the sociology of the ‘colonial encounter’. As it turned out, these initial meetings were more complicated than the Comaroffs suggested. The missionary

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<sup>10</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, vol. two, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, vol. one, p. 125. Paul Landau has noted the Comaroffs’ tendency to agglomerate African and British cultures in his “Hegemony and History in Jean and John Comaroffs’ *Of Revelation and Revolution*,” *Africa*, Vol. 70 (3) (2000), 501-519.

<sup>12</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, vol. one, p. 310.

<sup>13</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, vol. one, p. 171.

party that entered Mothibi's town in 1813 was culturally variegated: it included a black West Indian man and a speaker of Welsh.<sup>14</sup> There were a great number of other actors involved in the propagation of Christian ideas, more than the missionary Campbell knew. As early as 1801 the trader Jan Kok was working among Mothibi's people as a part-time evangelist, supported by the South African Missionary Society.<sup>15</sup> Griqua polity-builders were likewise engaged in the propagation of Christianity, using evangelism as a means to justify their sub-imperial rule over Tswana people. The evangelists of the London Missionary Society were entering into a world in which people were already arguing over Christianity and political power. Neither were the Tswana settled about their culture. The town that Rev. Campbell entered in 1813 was multi-ethnic. Chief Mothibi – Rev. Campbell's first conversation partner – was husband to a !Kora woman.<sup>16</sup> The historical evidence, in sum, suggests that it is too simple to treat these early engagements to an encounter between two cultures. The cast of characters was more variegated than that.<sup>17</sup>

For analytical reasons, too, the framework in which the first volume of *Revelation and Revolution* was composed now seems unhelpful. Seeing colonial history as an encounter between two ways of life causes us to ignore oblique alignments and tangential engagements. Instead of treating colonialism as an encounter, we might better investigate the variety of angles from which Africans engaged with missionaries' texts and ideas.<sup>18</sup> The missionary movement opened up a great number of discursive networks for Africans to participate in, and not all of them settled into the simple dichotomy between 'foreign' and 'native' culture. Thanks to the work of Frederick Cooper and other scholars, we can now see empire as something more than a political

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Elbourne, "Word Made Flesh: Christianity, Modernity, and Cultural Colonialism in the Work of John and Jean Comaroff," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 108 (2) (April 2003), 445. More generally, see Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> du Bruyn, "Of Muffled Southern Tswana," 305.

<sup>16</sup> Elbourne, "Word Made Flesh," 445.

<sup>17</sup> As Charles Piot notes, the second volume of *Revelation and Revolution* says much more about the variety of actors involved in Christian evangelism. See Charles Piot, "Of Hybridity, Modernity, and their Malcontents," *Interventions*, Vol. 3 (1) (2001), pp. 85-91.

<sup>18</sup> Argued in N.R. Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

and cultural force that suborned African people.<sup>19</sup> There were circuits of exchange – abolitionism, labor unionism, feminism – that drew Africans and Europeans together. Texts and ideas circulated, too.<sup>20</sup> Empires created trans-continental solidarities around ideas, and around projects, that upset the racial order of colonial culture.

In this essay I want to look into Robert Moffat's library and unpack the various subjectivities that Christian evangelists invited Africans to adopt. The preeminent Nonconformist text – besides the Bible – was *The Pilgrim's Progress*, published by the Puritan John Bunyan in 1678. The book is an allegory about the protagonist Christian, who as the story opens bears a heavy burden that "lieth hard" upon his back.<sup>21</sup> Guided by the character Evangelist – who advises him to "Fly from the Wrath to come" – Christian sets out on a long pilgrimage, blocking his ears to the entreaties of his wife and children. Along his way to the Celestial City Christian reaches the "place of deliverance", where the straps that bind his burden to his back are broken and it rolls into an open sepulcher. Bunyan's protagonist was perpetually in motion, laying down his responsibilities to home and culture and heading off toward a far horizon. He was a constant presence in Tswana intellectual life. The missionary Moffat brought out the first Tswana translation of *Pilgrim's Progress* in 1848, only a few years after the publication of the New Testament and a decade before the publication of the Tswana Old Testament.<sup>22</sup> In 1901 the book was published in a version edited by the prolific linguist Robert Price.<sup>23</sup> Price's edition was reprinted in 1902, 1921 and 1925. In 1954 Bunyan was again published in Tswana, in an edition translated by a team of

<sup>19</sup> Particularly important was Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler's edited *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. More recently, see Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. See also Derek R. Peterson (ed.), *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa and the Atlantic*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Stephanie Newell, *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana: How to Play the Game of Life*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002; and Isabel Hofmeyer, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which is to Come*, Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour and Co., n.d. (1678).

<sup>22</sup> *Loeto loa ga moKeresete*, Kuruman: Religious Tract Society, 1848.

<sup>23</sup> *Loeto loa ga moKeresete*, London: London Missionary Society, 1901.

African and missionary linguists.<sup>24</sup> Translating, editing and publishing *The Pilgrim's Progress* was an ongoing, constant endeavor for Nonconformist missionaries and their Tswana colleagues. And there was a wider forum in which Bunyan was circulated among southern Africa's people. As the literature scholar Isabel Hofmeyer has pointed out, Nonconformist admirers of Bunyan found a great variety of ways to introduce him to African audiences.<sup>25</sup> Illustrations from the text were displayed and made the subject of exegesis; bits of the text were serialized in vernacular-language newspapers. *Pilgrim's Progress*, Hofmeyer shows, was a portfolio, a compendium of images and tales that could be taken apart and presented.

The Comaroffs have very little to say about *Pilgrim's Progress*.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, *Revelation and Revolution* says little about Tswana Christians' thought, or about theology. The Comaroffs have evinced an abiding disinterest in the study of intellectual discourse. Their project, after all, is the study of hegemony, the "order of signs and practices" that "come to be taken-for-granted as the natural and received shape of the world."<sup>27</sup> Where ideologies are open to contestation, hegemonic power – because it seems to exist beyond human agency, and above controversy – is by definition silent. In the Comaroffs' succinct formulation, "hegemony, at its most effective, is mute," while "ideology babbles on."<sup>28</sup> Literature, theology, and epistolary writing are epiphenomenal. The biographical form is in their view a "modernist fantasy about society and selfhood according in which everyone is, potentially, in control of his or her destiny in a world made by the actions of autonomous 'agents'."<sup>29</sup> The Comaroffs therefore scorn the oral historian's method. About Paul Landau's book on Tswana Christianity, for example, they remark that his "narrative descriptions are rather thin for anthropologists' tastes; to wit, his reliance on interview data limits his ability to plumb the depths, the internal logic, of Tswana cultural understanding and religious experience." Instead of relying

<sup>24</sup> *Loeto loa ga moKeresete*, London: United Society for Christian Literature, 1954.

<sup>25</sup> Hofmeyer, *Portable Bunyan*, Ch. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Bunyan is mentioned in passing as the Comaroffs document the "stylized narratives" of missionaries' overland travels in southern Africa. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, vol. one, pp. 175–76.

<sup>27</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, vol. one, p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> They are quoting de Certeau here. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, vol. one, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> John and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992, p. 26.

on self-justifying narratives and biographies, the Comaroffs set out to “capture the broadest possible spectrum of signifying practices in any lived world,” to make their own archive by “disinterring Southern Tswana gestures and acts and utterances from the writings of non-Tswana.”<sup>30</sup>

But discourses – self-serving and partisan as they are – have real social and material lives. Texts, poetry, song, narratives and other discursive genres concretize changeable social relations, inspire action, invite emulation, and do work in the real world of human ambition and action.<sup>31</sup> They do not stay on library shelves, and neither can they be written off as mere ideology. As I shall show in what remains of this essay, Bunyan’s *Pilgrims’ Progress* – a text that circulated between colonial Africa and evangelical Britain – helped to constitute a trans-national community of readers who modeled their daily living after each other. My focus is on the East African Revival, a Christian conversion movement that began in Rwanda and spread through Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and eastern Congo over the course of the 1940s and 50s. Its converts – many of whom were women – were actors in a Bunyanesque drama. Like Christian, Bunyan’s protagonist, they were bound for another land. The terrain they traversed was both geographical and moral. Revivalists were inveterate travelers, avid users of the post office, and eager participants in the evangelical media. In their life stories they documented their sins, described their conversions and chronicled their daily movements toward a new life. They composed their autobiographies in dialogue with a broad, intercontinental ecumene of fellow-travelers whose carefully-crafted life stories they emulated. In the study of the Revival, I shall argue, we can see religious conversion in a different light: not as an analytically barren import from liberal metaphysics, and neither still as an epiphenomenal bit of ideology, but as a political action that opens up novel paths of self-narration, constitutes new ways of living, and unsettles the fixed alignments of colonial culture.

### Following the Narrow Way

For Protestant missionaries in eastern Africa, Bunyan’s book was both inspirational and useful. Even Anglican churchmen – historically antagonistic to the

<sup>30</sup>) Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, vol. two, pp. 52 & 53.

<sup>31</sup>) See Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

non-conformism from which Bunyan sprang – made haste to translate it. The first translation of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in eastern Africa was the Swahili edition, which appeared in 1888, only five years after the New Testament was published.<sup>32</sup> Uganda missionaries brought out a Luganda edition in 1900, only three years after the Luganda Bible had been published.<sup>33</sup> For missionaries and for African converts, translating Bunyan was an urgent matter. Perez Beyanga – one of the leaders of the Revival in southern Uganda – set to work translating *The Pilgrim's Progress* into his vernacular language, Lunyankole, in 1957. “If a single day passes without writing something for the Saviour,” he told the Anglican bishop, “I have a strong and strange sensation of not having done all that is required of me. Here ambitions vault my strength.”<sup>34</sup>

Rendered in DhoLuo, Swahili, Gikuyu, or Lunyankole by a cadre of earnest translators, Bunyan's text became standard reading material for students across eastern Africa. Revivalists were particularly avid in their engagements with Bunyan. The book taught the Revival's converts to see sin in material form, as a weighty bundle of possessions, deeds and dispositions that could, like the bundle on Christian's back, be separated from the whole fabric of their lives and disposed of. *Pilgrim's Progress* was a manual for ontology. In 1936 Isaka – a cook in the employ of missionary Dora Skipper at Gahini, in northern Rwanda – confessed that “I have stolen so much from you ever since I started that I don't know the value of it.”<sup>35</sup> The evening after Isaka made his confession, Skipper came upon him reading *Pilgrim's Progress* aloud, while her garden boy looked up the Biblical references. For Isaka as for other converts, even the smallest things – a few cups of milk, some salt – had to be accounted for. Skipper could scarcely find time to rest when in 1937 revivalist fervor became widespread at Gahini. “Streams are still coming in,” she wrote, returning “pencils, soap, francs and bits of cloth all stolen at some time or another.”<sup>36</sup> When a schoolgirl named Abisagi converted, she burned virtually all of her possessions – pillow, blanket, dresses, and photos – before an audience of her peers, explaining “why each thing had to go.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Msafiri: kitabu hiki kimefasirika katika kitabu cha kiingereza kiiwacho* “Pilgrim's Progress”, London: Religious Tract Society for the Universities' Mission, 1888.

<sup>33</sup> *Omutambuze*, London: Religious Tract Society, 1900.

<sup>34</sup> CoU 02 Bp 14/1: Perez Beyanga to Bishop, 27 December 1957.

<sup>35</sup> CMS Oxford, Dora Skipper papers, folio 2: diary entry for 7 May 1936.

<sup>36</sup> CMS Oxford, Dora Skipper papers, folio 2: diary entry for 19 April 1937.

<sup>37</sup> CMS Oxford, Dora Skipper papers, folio 2: diary entry for 18 April 1937; HMC JEC 3/4: Skipper to Church, 25 April 1937.

Converts practiced the discipline of self-editing. By this means they opened up an optical distance between themselves and their former lives. Like Bunyan's protagonist, African converts were on the move. They thought themselves bound for a new life. In 1945 the Gikuyu convert Bedan Ileri had a dream which lasted fully two weeks. The subject matter, he recalled, was of "pilgrimage and the way to heaven." "It was like television," Ileri remembered. "I was walking, the time went on, and then I entered into Heaven."<sup>38</sup> Like Bunyan's protagonist, revivalists thought themselves travelling a perilous road. In June 1950 Heshbon Mwangi, a leading revivalist in central Kenya, issued a circular letter titled "Satan's attacks on the Kenya Revival."<sup>39</sup> It likened Satan to Mr. Worldly Wiseman, the duplicitous character who lured Bunyan's protagonist off the straight and narrow way. Mwangi urged his readers to keep their feet on the highway to heaven. "We need to watch this pilgrimage so that Satan may not kill some of us before we reach the heavenly city," he wrote. "This journey is not of a few days."

When revivalists like Heshbon Mwangi and Bedan Ileri represented themselves as pilgrims, they were not only talking in metaphors. Converts conceived of themselves after the model of Bunyan's protagonist – as journeymen and journeywomen, leaving worldly attachments behind and moving unencumbered toward another home. In their careful editing of their possessions they cultivated a disposition to travel. Most of them travelled by bicycle, and it is not a coincidence that the history of the bicycle in eastern Africa overlaps with the trajectory of the Revival. In central Kenya, the schoolteacher Charles Muhoro Kareri could contemplate opening the region's first bicycle shop in 1926.<sup>40</sup> The Raleigh Company energetically marketed its bicycles in eastern Africa during the early 1930s. "It has the strength of a lion! The lightness of a feather! It goes faster than the wind!" went one Swahili-language newspaper advertisement.<sup>41</sup> Demand during and after the war drove up the cost of bicycles: where in 1939 bicycle tires in western Uganda cost three shillings apiece, by 1947 they cost nine shillings forty pence.<sup>42</sup> For workmen

<sup>38</sup> Murray papers: Interview, Bedan Ileri, Kabare, 26 May 1988.

<sup>39</sup> HMC JEC 5/4: Heshbon Mwangi, "Satan's attacks on the Kenya Revival," Jan. 1950.

<sup>40</sup> NMK Dennis papers A/21: Muhoro to Gordon Dennis, 30 March 1926.

<sup>41</sup> TNA Acc. J (450) 19153: *Mambo Leo* 90 (June 1930).

<sup>42</sup> KigDA Bundle 20, "Labour, general" file: "Western Province 1939 and 1947 wage rates," 2 August 1947.

earning an average of 15 shillings per month, owning a bicycle required careful planning. There was a thriving black market in stolen bicycles in Uganda during the early 1950s: the Anglican bishop called the number of stolen machines “stupendous.”<sup>43</sup> In 1953 Uganda’s government felt obliged to appoint a “Bicycle Thefts Committee” to inquire into the problem.<sup>44</sup> But demand continued to rise, and with it the price of cycling increased. In Bunyoro, in western Uganda, the revivalist John Kakonge found it difficult to purchase a bicycle in 1953.<sup>45</sup> Kakonge – desperate for an affordable bicycle – wanted government to set standard prices and punish shop-keepers who practiced price-gouging.

Revivalists like John Kakonge were eager to buy bicycles because they thought them to be critical to their religious vocation. After his conversion in February 1942, Enoch Lugimbirwa used his savings to purchase a used bicycle, and every weekend, he told me, “I went to the villages to preach the Gospel.”<sup>46</sup> On more than one occasion he cycled from his home in southern Uganda to northern Rwanda, crossing an international border, to meet with other revivalists. Female converts rode on the backs of bicycles that their male colleagues pedaled. They were obliged to wear simple khaki clothing, called *ebikaru*, that was tailored to prevent the dress from tangling around the bicycle’s wheels.<sup>47</sup> Their carefully contrived attire allowed converts to move with ease. Converts were known for their affinity for bicycles. Traders carrying salt in southern Uganda had long transported their loads on their heads. They learned to ride bicycles with the help of dexterous revivalists.<sup>48</sup> Evangelistic missions were bicycle-born: in 1957 a missionary observer in Uganda counted 26 bicycles among a company of revivalists setting off to evangelize their district, and in western Kenya a Luo revivalist remembered how he and other

<sup>43</sup> CoU 02 Bp 205/24: Bishop to Controller of Supplies, 9 June 1951.

<sup>44</sup> UNA Sec. file 13635: J.W. Kyeyune to secretary, Bicycle Thefts Committee, 6 March 1953.

<sup>45</sup> HDA “Petitions, complaints, and enquiries, general” file: John Kakonge to District Commissioner, 29 September 1953.

<sup>46</sup> Interview: Enoch Lugimbirwa, Ruharo, Ankole, Uganda, 8 July 2004.

<sup>47</sup> John Muhanguzi, “The spread of the Revival movement at Burunga in Nyabushozi County, East Ankole, Uganda,” Dip. Theo., Makerere University, 1985.

<sup>48</sup> George Kafureeka, “The Impact of the Revival movement on the church in East Ankole Diocese, with particular reference to Rushere Archdeaconry, Mbarara District, Uganda, 1965–75,” Dip. Theo., Uganda Christian University, 1999.

converts used to preach at “two, three, or four places in one day,” moving from place to place “in a great convoy” of bicycles.<sup>49</sup>

Whether on bicycles or (less commonly) on motorcycles or automobiles, converts were crossing political frontiers to attend conventions, visit other converts, and conduct evangelism. The Revival’s leading evangelists seem to have constantly been on the road. William Nagenda was the movement’s most-travelled cosmopolitan. The son of a Ganda landholder, Nagenda converted in 1936, left his government post in Entebbe, and took up a post as an evangelist in the Anglican mission in northern Rwanda. In September 1938 Nagenda travelled to western Kenya, where he and other converts from Uganda and Rwanda preached at the region’s first Revival convention.<sup>50</sup> In April 1941 Nagenda preached at a convention in western Uganda, and in June 1942 he spent a number of weeks in central Kenya.<sup>51</sup> By the 1950s Nagenda was travelling constantly, usually in the company of missionary Joe Church. In 1951 Church and Nagenda conducted an evangelistic tour of Nyasaland; in 1952 they toured India; and in 1956 they managed to visit western Kenya, Angola, Nyasaland, and Tanganyika in the space of a few months.<sup>52</sup>

William Nagenda and Joe Church had unusually wide-ranging itineraries. But they were not unique in their propensity for travel. East Africans made the Revival a cosmopolitan network, opening up a field of discourse that drew together people who were widely separated by language and geography. When in 1935 revivalist enthusiasm gripped the schoolgirls in northern Rwanda, among the first converts was Margaret Chyambari, from the kingdom of Toro in western Uganda. She became one of the region’s first Revival evangelists, conducting preaching missions in Kigemi, a district in Rwanda’s southwest, and in the southwestern corner of Uganda.<sup>53</sup> The tiny chiefdom of

<sup>49</sup> CoU 02 Bp 192/83: J. Hodgkins, diary, entry for 9 March 1957; George F. Pickens, *African Christian God-Talk: Matthew Ajuoga’s Johera Narrative*, Dallas: University Press of America, 2004, pp. 235–36.

<sup>50</sup> HMC JEC 1/2: Joe Church to Martin Capon, 30 June 1938. See J. Church, *Quest for the Highest: An Autobiographical Account of the East African Revival*, Exeter: Paternoster, 1981, pp. 158–59.

<sup>51</sup> HMC JEC 5/1: Nagenda to Church, 15 June 1942.

<sup>52</sup> For the report, see HMC JEC 2/9: Church, “Evangelistic journeys,” 1956.

<sup>53</sup> Chyambari’s travels are described in CMS Oxford, Skipper papers folio 2: diary entries for 2 July 1936 and 29 May 1937.

Bugufi – away in northwestern Tanganyika – produced a great number of travelling evangelists. In 1939, a group of students and teachers from Bugufi set off for Kibondo, 120 miles to the south, to preach and make converts; and in 1940 and again in 1945 Bugufi teachers lead Revival conventions in central Tanganyika.<sup>54</sup> In 1956 Bugufi's chief travelled by car to western Kenya, where he and William Nagenda preached before some 10,000 people.<sup>55</sup>

The Revival was a multi-lingual movement of people and ideas. It was punctuated by conventions where thousands of people gathered. At the 1956 convention in western Kenya – where Bugufi's chief preached – there were groups from central Kenya, coastal Kenya, Buganda, the Upper Nile, Rwanda, Tanganyika, Nairobi, and the Rift Valley.<sup>56</sup> A missionary observer commented on the polyglot character of the proceedings: he met delegates who spoke Nandi, DhoLuo, Kikuyu, Luganda, Lunyoro, Kinyarwanda and other languages.<sup>57</sup> Preachers relied on translators who rendered their words into the vernaculars of their audiences. Ezikieri Balaba – a schoolteacher who acted as translator in the earliest Revival meetings in southern Uganda – spoke poor English. He translated directly from the Luganda that the preachers used into Lukiga, the language of southern Uganda's people.<sup>58</sup> Simeon Nsibambi – William Nagenda's brother-in-law – spoke English and Swahili poorly. When in 1937 he led a convention in central Kenya, he refused to allow his missionary host to translate his words into English. Nsibambi spoke Luganda to his Kenyan audience, relying on his travelling companion to translate directly into Swahili.<sup>59</sup> Revivalists had to be cosmopolitans. They had to learn new languages, travel to conventions, learn to ride bicycles, and compose their lives in dialogue with people from distant corners of eastern Africa.

<sup>54</sup> DCT, loose papers: Central Tanganyika Diocesan Letter 38 (August 1939); HMC JEC 1/3: Bakewell to Church, 22 March 1940; DCT Berega Log Book, entry for 7-11 May 1945.

<sup>55</sup> HMC JEC 2/9: Joe Church, "Evangelistic journeys," 1956.

<sup>56</sup> ACK ACSO/CPN/1, "Nyanza Chaplaincy, 1954-60" file: Festo Olang', et. al., "Maseno Convention," n.d. (but 1956).

<sup>57</sup> HMC JEC 2/9: Church, "Evangelistic journeys," 1956.

<sup>58</sup> For Balaba as translator, see James Katarikawe and John Wilson, "The East African Revival Movement," Masters of Theology and Missiology thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1975. For Balaba's language skills, HMC JEC 1/2: Church to Martin Capon, 30 June 1938.

<sup>59</sup> CMS Annual Letters file: T.F.C. Bewes, 22 June 1937.

### The Social Work of Autobiography

In their polyglot gatherings converts worked out novel techniques of self-presentation. The core discipline of the Revival was the testimony of conversion. Converts had to describe their passage from one world to another, to contrast their former ways of sin with their new lifestyles. They practiced their autobiographies in front of audiences that made careful, critical judgments about them. A missionary described a 1949 convention in southern Gikuyuland in this way:

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. 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.<sup>60</sup>

There was a specific set of criteria that revivalist audiences used in their evaluation of testimonies. Revivalists in northwestern Tanganyika were said to “grade the testimonies given and to refuse to accept a conversion that does not follow the same pattern as their own. If one or more of the cardinal sins – adultery, drunkenness, theft or idolatry – is not mentioned, it is felt that something is missing.”<sup>61</sup> These and other sins were marks of depravity. When folded into a well-constructed testimony, they helped the convert set her old life in sharp relief. Converts needed to generate a forward propulsion through their life stories. They needed, that is, to characterize their sinfulness in order to contrast the old ways with the new. The work of autobiographical self-positioning obliged converts to look for the smallest shred of material with which to dramatize their conversion. Missionaries worried that the first revivalists were “wanting to sit and brood over themselves... instead of feeding on the Promises.”<sup>62</sup> But converts were not passively brooding. They were actively generating a narrative about themselves, a narrative that made them converts.

<sup>60</sup> Robert MacPherson, “The East African Revival,” *Kikuyu News* 193 (Sept. 1950).

<sup>61</sup> ELCT Box BII: 1, “Annual Reports, 1945-54” file: Bukoba area superintendent’s report, 1952.

<sup>62</sup> CMS Oxford, Dora Skipper papers, folio 2: diary entry for 21 Feb. 1937.

Testimonies had to be carefully composed, edited, and polished. Some converts wrote their autobiographies down in letters that they posted to fellow-converts in other parts of eastern Africa. The development of the postal system in eastern Africa was uneven, and it overlapped with the region's political geography. Buganda – the jewel of Britain's east African crown – was favored with superior infrastructure: government printed stamps and organized a mail service in 1895, and by 1903 post offices had been opened in Kampala and Entebbe.<sup>63</sup> The postal system was slower to arrive in regions outside Buganda. But in 1936 it took only two weeks for a letter from Britain to reach the mission station at Gahini, in northern Rwanda, via the newly-inaugurated Empire Air Mail Scheme.<sup>64</sup> Revivalists thought the postal system to be an essential tool in their self-representation. Letter-writing helped to constitute the Revival as an imagined community, for in their correspondence revivalists came to see themselves part of a wider, intercommunicating movement. One of the earliest autobiographical letters came from Yosiya Kinuka. In 1936 Kinuka put his testimony on paper – in English – in a circular letter addressed to his “Ruanda friends.”<sup>65</sup> The letter got Kinuka a wide readership: it was reprinted in the missionary journal *Ruanda Notes*, and circulated in Britain, Kenya and Tanzania.<sup>66</sup> In 1946 Kinuka's testimony was again reprinted in a book published by the Ruanda Mission.<sup>67</sup> Not all converts found such a large audience. But like Kinuka, they used letter-writing to communicate their life stories to a readership outside their immediate locale. In western Kenya, Luo revivalists sent a “stream of letters” to a missionary schoolmaster at Nairobi, describing their evangelistic work and documenting the slow growth of the Revival community in Nyanza.<sup>68</sup> In Buganda, a student in secondary school kept up a correspondence with Sarah, William Nagenda's wife, announcing that she and other students had

<sup>63</sup> Edward Proud, *The Postal History of Uganda and Zanzibar*, East Sussex: Postal History Publications, 1993, pp. 84-85 and p. 147.

<sup>64</sup> CMS Oxford, Dora Skipper papers, folio 2: diary entry for 21 March 1936.

<sup>65</sup> HMC JEC 6/3: Undated letter from Yosiya Kinuka to “Ruanda friends,” n.d. (but 1936).

<sup>66</sup> MAM E/1 E: Yosea Kinuka, untitled essay, *Ruanda Notes* 51 (1936).

<sup>67</sup> A. Stanley-Smith, *Road to Revival: The Story of the Ruanda Mission*, London: Church Missionary Society, 1946.

<sup>68</sup> HMC JEC 1/2: Martin Capon to Joe Church, 21 November 1939.

been converted.<sup>69</sup> In these and in many other letters converts took up a place in a larger, multi-lingual sphere of exchange. It is not a coincidence that in 1944 the leading revivalists in Masaka, in central Uganda, were employees of the post office.<sup>70</sup> It was through the postal system that converts worked out their autobiographies.

As they put their life stories on paper, as they read other people's testimonies, and as they listened to the multi-lingual autobiographies at Revival conventions, revivalists came to see themselves as sharing a trajectory, a project, with people who they had never before met. This sense of simultaneity – the awareness that other people in distant parts of the world were likewise converting – was cultivated by the editorial work that missionary Joe Church, evangelist William Nagenda, and other architects of the Revival did. Church – who read medicine at Cambridge – went as a missionary to Rwanda in 1927, where he remained for over forty years. Upon his death in 1989 his private papers filled some eight footlockers and six suitcases.<sup>71</sup> Church was an avid and active archivist. He seems to have annotated virtually every piece of correspondence that passed into his hands, and by these annotations he created an index of the Revival's onward course. In March 1937, for example, Church received a letter from the missionary Dora Skipper. Skipper described how, at an evening meeting in northern Rwanda, dozens of people had prayed for salvation. "It seemed something like the collapse of Jericho," Skipper wrote.<sup>72</sup> Using a red pencil, Church wrote "the collapse of Jericho" in the margins. Two weeks later he quoted Skipper's paragraph about "the collapse of Jericho" in a letter he wrote to Uganda's bishop.<sup>73</sup> Church was using Skipper's letter as evidence to document the spread of the Revival in eastern Africa. When in 1981 he published *Quest for the Highest*, his "autobiographical account of the East African Revival," Church once again quoted from Dora Skipper's letter.

<sup>69</sup> HMC JEC 5/4: Nagenda, circular letter, 1 July 1946.

<sup>70</sup> BNA CO 536/215/4: "Activities of the abalokole, twice born or saved ones," part II, 30 April 1944; Butler, *Hill Ablaze*, 113.

<sup>71</sup> Joe Church's papers – now held at the Henry Martyn Centre in Cambridge – are described in Terry Barringer, "'Recordings of the Work of the Holy Spirit': The Joe Church Archives," in Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood (eds.), *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2010, pp. 271–285.

<sup>72</sup> HMC JEC 3/4: Skipper to Decie and Joe Church, 31 March 1937.

<sup>73</sup> HMC JEC 3/1: Church, untitled notes, 16 April 1937.

At Gahini in 1937, he wrote, “ten or more were praying with deeply convicted hearts...and the walls of Jericho came down.”<sup>74</sup> For Joe Church, the archive was never simply a repository. It was a resource that had to be organized, edited, and presented.

This editorial work gave Church the evidence with which to compose a narrative about the Revival’s onward course. Church’s favorite literary genre was undoubtedly biography. He kept files full of correspondence he received from African converts, and he used this source material to compose a great number of biographies.<sup>75</sup> His favorite subject was Blasio Kigozi. Kigozi, an evangelist and schoolteacher in the employ of the Anglican mission in Rwanda, died in Kampala on 25 January 1936, after delivering a series of powerful sermons in southern and central Uganda. Kigozi’s body was scarcely in the grave when Church brought him back to life, on paper, as an advocate for the Revival. On 31 January, Joe Church sent his supporters in England a cyclostyled first draft of Blasio’s biography. Titled “Blasio, Friend of Ruanda,” it described his early life, his work in Rwanda, and his conversion and evangelistic labors on behalf of the Revival.<sup>76</sup> On 3 February, Church issued a second draft, titled “Blasio Kigozi: An Appreciation.”<sup>77</sup> By April 1936, a scant three months after Kigozi’s death, Church had prepared a book-length biography, in Luganda, titled *Awake, Uganda!*<sup>78</sup> Church was sure that “Blasio’s message must not be lost – it may have a very definite place in rousing the Baganda to think of Revival.”<sup>79</sup>

Joe Church was not the only one organizing an archive. The Ganda evangelist William Nagenda also possessed a large mailing list. He composed lengthy circulars, printed on a cyclostyling machine, which quoted from the many letters he had received from other converts. Nagenda’s circulars drew

<sup>74</sup> Church, *Quest for the Highest*, p. 144.

<sup>75</sup> Church, *Forgive Them: The Story of an African Martyr*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966; Church, *William Nagenda: A Great Lover of Jesus*, London: Ruanda Mission, 1974; HMC JEC 8/5: “How are you getting along?”, n.d.

<sup>76</sup> MAM AC 4: Church, “Blasio, Friend of Ruanda,” 31 January 1936.

<sup>77</sup> CoU 02 Bp 223/28: Joe Church, “Rev. Blasio Kigozi, Died 25 January 1936: An Appreciation,” 3 Feb. 1936.

<sup>78</sup> Joe Church, *Awake, Uganda! The story of Blasio Kigozi and his vision of revival*, Kampala: Uganda Bookshop, 1957 (1936).

<sup>79</sup> CoU 02 Bp 223/28: Church to Bishop Stuart, 26 April 1936.

people widely separated by geography together on the page, attenuating distance and cultivating an intimate sense of shared purpose. A 1942 circular described how “the work at Budo is still going ahead,” how “at Gayaza, Ezra now is going on well in the light,” and how “on Oct. 16<sup>th</sup> we are going to Hoima and Masindi; we hope for many blessings.”<sup>80</sup> These and other letters were chronicles, documenting the spiritual condition of the far-flung people whom Nagenda corresponded. Distributed through the post, the chronicles that Nagenda and Church composed helped revivalists see themselves as part of a larger community. The press gave revivalists an even wider readership for their chronicles. The Ruanda Mission – the Anglican organization to which a great number of missionary revivalists belonged – created a wide range of printed media to publicize its work. *Ruanda Notes* came out, on a quarterly basis, from 1924 until 1974.<sup>81</sup> In 1944 the mission brought out a tabloid newspaper under the title *Front Line News*.<sup>82</sup> Edited by the indefatigable Joe Church, the newspaper carried reports on conventions, testimonies from African converts, and correspondence from Revival evangelists. The second issue of *Front Line News*, for example, contained an article titled “The conversion of M..., a young Mututsi”; a letter from William Nagenda; and a report from Joe Church on “The Revival at Shyira,” in Burundi.<sup>83</sup>

Through these media the testimonies that Africans composed found an engaged readership among English evangelicals. The University of Cambridge was home to a particularly avid audience.<sup>84</sup> During the late 1930s and 1940s a group of evangelical students regularly met to read missionary journals at Henry Martyn Hall, adjoining Holy Trinity Church. Joe Church – himself a graduate of Emmanuel College – thought Henry Martyn Hall to be the “power house that had loosed God’s movings in Ruanda and Uganda.”<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Nagenda, circular letter, 14 October 1942, quoted in BNA CO 536/215/4: “Activities of the Abalokole, Twice Born, or Saved Ones,” 16 Oct. 1943.

<sup>81</sup> A complete run can be found in HMC JEC 20/1-9.

<sup>82</sup> *Front Line News* was superseded in 1947 by *Revival News*, also under Church’s editorship. These journals can be found in HMC JEC 25/6 and /9.

<sup>83</sup> MAM E 1/7: *Front Line News* 2 (Nov. 1944).

<sup>84</sup> Cambridge has long been a center for Anglican evangelicalism. See Andrew Porter, “Cambridge, Keswick, and late-nineteenth-century attitudes to Africa,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 5 (1) (1976), pp. 5-34.

<sup>85</sup> Church, *Quest for the Highest*, 147.

Church's family house was in Little Shelford, near Cambridge, and he and other revivalists made a habit of preaching at the University during their periodic visits to the United Kingdom. When in 1955 the American evangelist Billy Graham conducted a convention at Cambridge, among the preachers who accompanied him was Erica Sabiti, a Revival evangelist from southern Uganda.<sup>86</sup> There was an international audience for African converts' life stories. When in 1947 Joe Church and William Nagenda visited Lausanne in Switzerland, they spent most of their time describing the testimonies of African converts. The Swiss evangelicals who heard them were impressed: in a newspaper report, a group of pastors from the Canton of Vaud thought it "amazing to see Africans of free and open face, who no longer blindly copy the Europeans."<sup>87</sup> Carefully edited and polished, Africans' life stories were both inspirational and exemplary.

Revivalists arranged their lives with a far-flung fellowship in view. They addressed that larger community in their correspondence, in autobiographies, and through the evangelical media. In 1944, a Ruanda Mission newsletter carried a report on the convention at Kayero, in Burundi.<sup>88</sup> The missionary author described how the congregation of 500 people had streamed from the church, "carrying charms or even bits of the wrappings...waving them over their heads and singing 'Rejoice and be glad'." Penitent converts lined up some seventy charms on a table. They were producing evidence that cast their former deeds in sharp relief. The missionary author described how one of the converts told him to select certain charms for display in Britain "as a letter from us to show how God has set us free." The remainder of the charms were burned in a huge bonfire, and "an absolute shout of triumph went up as the flames rose."<sup>89</sup> Gathered round the bonfire, converts' dramatic self-representations were addressed to a local audience at Kayero. But converts' actions were also addressed to a distant audience that they knew through the post, through the media, and through Revival conventions. Converts composed their life histories at a frontier. They related their autobiographies to a community of people who lived far away, with whom they

<sup>86</sup> HMC JEC 9/4: Erica Sabiti to Joe Church, 6 November 1955.

<sup>87</sup> HMC JEC 1/5: "The team of Ruanda among the pastors of the Canton of Vaud," *Semur Vaudois*, March 1947.

<sup>88</sup> MAM E 1/5: Box collectors letter no. 1, Jan. 1942.

<sup>89</sup> All quotations come from MAM E 1/5: Box collectors letter no. 1, Jan. 1942.

shared a common trajectory, and with whom they practiced techniques of self-representation.

In their attendance at multi-lingual conventions, in reading other converts' correspondence, and in their bicycle-borne travels, converts came to see themselves as part of a large, multi-sited field of action. They addressed that larger audience by composing autobiographies. Through a set of generic practices – the confessional letter, the testimony, the biography – converts learned how to contrast past with present, how to catalogue their sins and classify their possessions. Converts knew they had a story to tell: they knew, that is, that their carefully-edited autobiographies were socially consequential. By their testimonial practices, in their letters and in their confessions of sin, they added to the archives that the architects of the Revival kept and made themselves nodes in a transcontinental network of intellectual and religious exchange.

### **Pilgrims and Patriots**

Even as revivalists oriented themselves toward a cosmopolitan community, other activists were positioning themselves as patriots, as sons of the soil and natives of a particular territory. During the 1940s and 50s men in various regions in eastern Africa came to feel themselves responsible for women to whom they were not directly related. Thousands of rural men went to live in Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, or Kampala, and there they were folded into a competitive masculine world. Anxious to protect their honor against other men's insults, moral reformers set to work creating institutions that would uphold women's discipline and protect their people's reputation. The moral campaigners of the late 1940s and 1950s did not speak as Kenyans, or Ugandans, or as East Africans. They claimed to be defenders of particular *patria* – of a Gikuyu, or Luo, or Haya commonwealth – whose character was at risk. They invented or refurbished customary legal codes, founded tribal welfare associations, wrote inspirational history, conducted anti-prostitution campaigns, and constituted nativisms. In these ways east Africa's conservative reformers sought to fix women in place as wives and daughters, create respectable families, and earn other men's respect.

The conjugal crisis of the late 1940s and 1950s was the engine driving the creation of east Africa's patriotisms. By speaking in the name of their

forefathers, eastern Africa's moral reformers claimed the authority with to impose discipline on recalcitrant women. In western Kenya members of the Luo Union launched a program of research into the precolonial past. Their findings, published in earnestly instructive history books, contrasted the discipline of their ancestors with the corruption of contemporary times. With history books in hand, Luo Unionists could lecture independent women about the need to obey their husbands and fathers.<sup>90</sup> In northwestern Tanganyika members of the Haya Union celebrated rural life as the foundation of moral virtue. Over the course of a decade-long campaign they forcibly repatriated dozens of Haya prostitutes to their rural homes. By compelling city-dwelling women to behave as obedient wives and daughters, Haya Unionists rehabilitated their people's image and claimed an honored place in eastern Africa's public sphere.<sup>91</sup> In Buganda, the organizers of the populist Bataka Union cast themselves as spokesmen of the *bataka*, the distant ancestors of Ganda polity. In history books and in their public discourses they conjured up a political community defined by its devotion to egalitarian principles. By their historical work they sought to push Buganda's monarchy – as a recent innovation – to the margins of the political sphere.<sup>92</sup>

The Revival challenged patriotic men's efforts to root people within tradition and culture. Seen through the eyes of eastern Africa's conservative reformers, converts – like prostitutes – were dangerous, displaced, unattached, and uncommitted to their natal communities. Revivalists willfully ignored the lessons that history taught about comportment and gentility. They behaved in aggressively antisocial ways. In western Kenya, for example, converts refused to lend their cups or plates to their unconverted relatives, and refused to take part in funerals, even for their own parents. They called the dead “dry wood,” brushing off their obligations with the saying “Let the dead

<sup>90</sup> See Matthew Carotenuto, “*Riuruok E Teko*: Cultivating Identity in Colonial and Postcolonial Kenya,” *African Affairs*, Vol. 53 (2) (2006), pp. 53–73; and Derek R. Peterson, “Revivalism and Dissent in Colonial East Africa,” in K. Ward and E. Wild-Wood (eds.), *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2010, pp. 162–182.

<sup>91</sup> See Birgitta Larsson, *Conversion to Greater Freedom? Women, Church, and Social Change in North-western Tanzania under Colonial Rule*, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1991.

<sup>92</sup> Carol Summers, “Grandfathers, grandsons, morality, and radical politics in late colonial Buganda,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 38 (3) (2005), pp. 427–447.

bury their own dead.”<sup>93</sup> Revivalists aggressively preached against polygamy: one of my interviewees remembered how as a child she heard converts parading with trumpets around her home, singing *Nyachira wangdhiyo e mach*, “The second wife is going to hell.”<sup>94</sup> All of this was deeply offensive. But what particularly discomfited Nyanza’s people was converts’ open talk about sex. One of my interviewees described how, while living in Nairobi during the mid 1940s, she had been embarrassed by a group of Luo converts.<sup>95</sup> “They used to walk around in rags,” she remembered, “and the testimonies they were giving were not pleasant.” There was one man from South Nyanza who seemed always to be in her ear. He made a habit of describing how he had once frequented prostitutes’ lairs. My interviewee was so disturbed by the convert’s offensive testimony that she left Nairobi and returned to her rural home.

Converts were out to advance themselves, talking without reserve, turning away from their social obligations, neglecting their kin. Their lack of commitment to their families made many people wonder about their sexual fidelity. In western Kenya, converts were known as *Jo-Par*, the “people of the mat.”<sup>96</sup> The name referred to the woven mats, *par*, on which male and female converts were rumored to sleep, naked, while on preaching missions. There were accusations that revivalist preachers were making other men’s wives pregnant.<sup>97</sup> Even the government’s District Officer had heard that revivalists had “dreams in which they commit adultery with some other person, and then according to the custom of the sect they do so in reality.”<sup>98</sup> Everyone could agree that revivalists lacked discipline.

Throughout eastern Africa patriotic organizers sought to impose order on troublesome converts. In northern Rwanda and in southern Uganda government chiefs barred converts from singing after dusk. Converts who broke the

<sup>93</sup> Oral interview: Julia Okumu Mubiri, with Helen Anyang’o, Preska Sewe, and Preska Wajewa, Kisumu town, 24 November 2007.

<sup>94</sup> Oral interview: Lois Achieng’ Juma, Tieng’re, Kisumu, 22 November 2007.

<sup>95</sup> Oral interview: Naomi Monica Olweny, Nyayiera, Bondo, 23 November 2007.

<sup>96</sup> Oral interviews: Fannual Agong’a, Rabuor, 21 November 2007; Habakuk Onyang’o Abogno, Kisumu town, 20 November 2007.

<sup>97</sup> KNA DX 21/9/1: Assistant District Commissioner, “Report of the committee on African religious bodies,” 20 January 1951.

<sup>98</sup> KNA DC Kakamega 1/17/3: District Officer to District Commissioner North Nyanza, 1 November 1954.

curfew were imprisoned and beaten. In Buganda, the African leaders of the Anglican church adopted a rule that “no interruption of divine service can be allowed by unauthorized speaking, singing, drumming etc.,” and that “the public confession of shameful sins is not allowed” in church buildings.<sup>99</sup> The police Special Branch in Uganda placed revivalists under surveillance, opening their correspondence under wartime censorship laws. The Director of Intelligence and Security worried that the converts were “openly attacking persons in authority in the established church, and the next step may easily be against the authority of the state.”<sup>100</sup> In western Kenya Luo patriots broke away from the Anglican church, complaining that it had been corrupted by revivalists’ indiscipline. They founded a new church, called the *Johera*, the “People of Love.” *Johera* men and women welcomed polygamists into church membership, and made a show of their decorum and propriety in liturgical practice.<sup>101</sup> In northwestern Tanganyika Haya Lutherans expelled revivalists from their church, arguing that their anti-social behavior was an embarrassment to Christianity. In central Kenya Mau Mau oath-takers promised to fight for *wiathi*, for social discipline and self-mastery. Their first targets were revivalists, whose immoral conduct was a threat to Gikuyu commonwealth.<sup>102</sup> And in western Uganda the founders of the separatist Rwenzururu kingdom – learning from the historical research they had conducted – identified their constituents as natives, with a prior claim to the mountains’ resources. Revivalists – who avidly learned new languages and traveled indiscriminately, without regard to Rwenzururu’s culture building exercise – were among their earliest antagonists.<sup>103</sup>

Where patriotic organizers sought to confine their constituents to a particular homeland, converts lived on the road: they conceived themselves as pilgrims, not as natives. Where patriots sought to cultivate ties of love and

<sup>99</sup> CMS G3 A11/1: Bishop Stuart to Webster, 18 Jan. 1944.

<sup>100</sup> KNA DC/Kisumu 1/36/88: Director of Intelligence and Security, 13 June 1944.

<sup>101</sup> E.B. Welbourn and B.A. Ogot, *A place to feel at home: a study of two independent churches in western Kenya*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966.

<sup>102</sup> Derek R. Peterson, “Wordy Women: Gender Trouble and the Oral Politics of the East African Revival in Gikuyuland,” *Journal of African History*, Vol. 43 (2001), 469–489.

<sup>103</sup> Derek R. Peterson, “States of Mind: Political Vision in the Rwenzururu Kingdom, Western Uganda,” in Derek Peterson and Giacomo Macola (eds.), *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009, pp. 171–190.

affection among their ethnic confreres, converts organized their lives in relation to an international ecumene. And where patriots sought to reform their constituents' manners to accord with patriarchal convention, converts comported themselves without discretion. In eastern Africa, conversion was a form of social criticism. Living in anticipation of a new world, converts would not agree to inherit their fathers' cultures, or their fathers' projects.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of *Revelation and Revolution* the Comaroffs warn their readers about the “analytic dangers [that] lurk behind the concept of conversion,” and brand the term as “Eurocentric”, unalterably beholden to a modern, liberal conception of the self.<sup>104</sup> How well, they ask, can scholars use ‘conversion’ to describe “the highly variable, usually gradual, often implicit, and demonstrably syncretic manner in which social identities, cultural styles, and ritual practices of African peoples were transformed by the evangelical encounter?” Tswana people, argue the Comaroffs, were *bricoleurs*, not believers in a singular doctrine: they assembled rituals, stitched together clothing styles, and developed therapies according to an idiosyncratic pattern. For the Comaroffs, scholars' task is to look beyond believers' testimonies of conversion, to ignore the “spiritual and verbal battles” in which missionaries and heathen engaged, and to focus instead on the material, social forms by which hegemony was made.<sup>105</sup>

Their disregard for religious discourse has made it difficult for the Comaroffs to analyze the work that Africans and other colonized people did as they positioned themselves in the social and religious world. In eastern Africa, conversion was a means by which hegemonic cultural forms were made subject to examination. Revivalists would not agree to settle into the containers of colonial culture, into the dialectic between African and European ways. They were travelers, pilgrims who had little time for a long

<sup>104</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, vol. one, p. 250; for “Eurocentric”, Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, vol. two, p. 117.

<sup>105</sup> See Joel Robbins, “Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity,” *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 48 (1) (Feb. 2007), pp. 5-38.

conversation. Their autobiographical work was critical consciousness. In their forensic examinations they sorted through cultural property, identified their sins, and set themselves in motion toward another world. Their narrow path directed them off at a tangent from the dialectics of tradition and modernity.

The historian Steven Feierman has remarked that *Revelation and Revolution* – in all its rich analysis of colonial hybridity – is built around a narrative that begins in Europe.<sup>106</sup> Feierman invites scholars to “build macronarratives that originate in Africa,” to explore the globalization of African ideas, to situate Europeans in relation African discourses. This essay has not met Feierman’s challenge. But it has suggested other ways – outside the framework of the ‘encounter’ – to study colonial African history. Africans engaged with the missionary project in a variety of ways, and not everything could be condensed into the simplified stereotypes of ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ culture. Revivalists composed testimonies that circulated widely, in conventions, in the post, and in the media. Their life stories were plotted in dialogue with an audience that was neither foreign nor native, a community of pilgrims that mapped a discursive and moral path together. In their cosmopolitan travels, revivalists unpicked the demographic and moral order that patriots sought to impose upon their constituents. Converts were subversives on the political and cultural terrain defined by the architects of eastern Africa’s ethnic homelands. Wending their way toward the gates of heaven, they unbuckled the consolidating power of culture and opened up novel paths of self-representation.

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<sup>106</sup> Steven Feierman, “The Comaroffs and the Practice of Historical Ethnography,” *Interventions*, Vol. 3 (1) (2001), pp. 24–30.