

SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

Black Atlantic Christianity

Judith Casselberry and Elizabeth A. Pritchard, eds. *Spirit on the Move: Black Women and Pentecostalism in Africa and the Diaspora*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2019. ix + 238 pp. References. Index. \$25.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1478000327.

Cécile Fromont, ed. *Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas: Performance, Representation, and the making of Black Atlantic Tradition*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. 203 pp. List of Illustrations. Index. \$89.95. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0271083292.

At the African Studies Association meeting in Washington, D.C. in early December 2016, I had a depressing experience when I spoke on an African Christianity panel with one other panelist, and only two people attended to listen to our papers. And this was the *only* African Christianity panel scheduled during the multi-day event. Seemingly, the African Studies community did not care any more about African Christianity—the largest religion on the continent, which claims more Christians now than anywhere else in the world. My pessimistic view has changed, however, with the recent publication of several excellent monographs and edited volumes on African Christianity since 2016.

The two reviewed edited books, *Spirit on the Move: Black Women and Pentecostalism in Africa and the Diaspora* edited by Judith Casselberry and Elizabeth A. Pritchard and *Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas: Performance, Representation, and the Making of Black Atlantic Tradition* edited by Cécile Fromont, are putting African Christianity back on the scholarly map as a significant topic within African and African Diaspora Studies. *Spirit on the Move* focuses on Pentecostalism, the newest and most explosive form of Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora, while *Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas* examines the oldest form of African Christianity in the Americas—Catholicism from the Kongo, which accompanied the enslaved from southwest Africa during the transatlantic slave trade. The first book details Pentecostalism in primarily ethnographic terms while focusing on gender (and black feminist studies

more particularly), whereas the second examines African Christianity in historical context while examining performance and material culture.

Spirit on the Move is divided into four sections, the first being “Saving Race,” which is composed of two chapters written by John Burdick and Elizabeth McAlister. These chapters examine race in the context of Pentecostal churches in Brazil and Haiti respectively, both of them focusing on the discourse of spiritual warfare. Burdick examines the way in which Brazilian gospel singers insist that their Blackness is central to God’s salvific action in the world, while McAlister takes up similar Evangelical/Pentecostal notions of Christian citizenship by interrogating the ways in which race, in the context of spiritual warfare, is condemned as a demonic and idolatrous “African” tradition.

Part Two is titled “Scrutinizing and Sanctifying the Body”; it is also comprised of two chapters that investigate women’s bodies as a field of political and cultural production and contestation within Black Pentecostal churches. Linda van den Kamp’s chapter studies the ways in which Brazilian Pentecostalism in post-civil war Mozambique enrolls women’s bodies in political battles over gender practices. Conversely, Deidre Helen Crumbley’s chapter focuses on ways in which the strict gendered dress codes of a Sanctified Philadelphia church reflects African-American women’s desire to recover a sense of control over and sacredness within their bodies.

Part Three is titled “Sonic Power,” which demonstrates that women’s singing and spirit-filled worship reestablishes a relationship with a God whom many believe has forsaken the world and/or has ignored the prayers of the faithful. Paula Aymer’s chapter analyzes the efforts of the Wailing Women Worldwide, an interdenominational missionary organization that seeks to train women to become masculinized spiritual warriors while exploiting conventional feminine characteristics. Specifically, Aymer’s chapter focuses on a Nigerian band of evangelizing women in Grenada. Judith Casselberry’s chapter analyzes the messages that are conveyed by Christian women’s bodies as they sing and labor through liturgical performances which create power for them, in contrast to men who claim authority at the pulpit within a New York City Pentecostal church.

The final section, Part Four, is titled “Modeling the State,” and these chapters analyze spiritual power in contrast or comparison to state power. Jane Soothill’s chapter examines Neo-Pentecostal churches in Accra, Ghana, concluding that these churches model themselves on state patronage relationships that reinforce elite men and women’s power. Laura Premack’s chapter focuses on Nigerian Pentecostal women within the Christian Apostolic Church. Their demands for maternal care in the mid-twentieth century drove both church and state resources toward building these institutions.

Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas is also an edited collection divided into four parts. In Part One, the authors focus on ritual mock battles from the Christian Kongo that influenced such rituals in the Americas. In Chapter One, Jeroen Dewulf argues that the origins of New Orleans’s Mardi Gras Indians developed out of the Christian Kongo *sangamento* ritual dances performed originally in the city’s Congo Square. In the second chapter, Kevin Dawson

describes how men and women staged a mock naval battle in the Brazilian state of Pernambuco in 1815 in a certain way that reimagined the Iberian ritual drama of *Moors and Christians*, bringing west-central African traditions to Brazil. In Chapter Three, Miguel A. Valerio examines the first recorded festival staged by black performers in the Americas in 1539. In this celebration of the truce of Aigues-Mortes in Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the seat of the Iberian colonial territory of New Spain, Valerio argues that the black cavalry in the mock battle against heathens were *ladinos* or Africans who came to Mexico after having lived in Iberia following their origin in central Africa.

Part Two shifts gears toward black kings and diplomatic representation. Lisa Voigt in Chapter Four describes African kings in colonial Brazil and analyzes how Africans found ways to represent themselves positively in colonial Brazil in the context of *congados* festivals. In a particularly interesting chapter—which demonstrates the flow of peoples of African descent from the New World to Africa—Junia Ferreira Furtado in Chapter Five shows how two priests from Brazil with Afro-Christian backgrounds interpreted ceremonial life in the kingdom of Dahomey in the eighteenth century based on their culture.

Part Three of this fine collection, titled “Reconsidering Primary Sources,” examines well-known primary sources and reevaluates them in different ways. In Chapter Six, Cécile Fromont examines a lithograph by the Bavarian artist Johann Moritz Rugendas which was based on his travels in Brazil. This chapter probes the ways in which the lithograph—a visual representation of a celebration organized by Brazilian socioreligious organizations called *congados* or *congadas*—attempted to make visible the social, religious, and political stakes of the performance. Dianne M. Stewart in Chapter Seven proposes a new interpretation of Orisa religion in Trinidad, challenging the popular notion of a syncretic Yoruba and Euro-Western Christian formation by arguing for the influence of pre-existing Afro-Catholic influence on the island and the religious community itself. Part Four is the final section, composed of just one chapter by ethnomusicologist Michael Iyanaga, who analyzes the domestic patron saint festivals in Venezuela, Brazil, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic, arguing that they have central African roots.

Both edited volumes—*Spirit on the Move* and *Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas*—are amazing books that should be widely read by the African Studies community and particularly within the (re-emerging!) field of African Christianity. Both volumes explore the movement of African Christianity in the Atlantic world in two senses. In the first sense, both books are about the movement of people and ideas across the Atlantic. *Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas* is explicitly about the festivals employed by Kongolese Catholics in the Americas who were victims of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. But one chapter in particular, by Furtado, involves the movement of people from the Americas to West Africa in the context of priests from Brazil visiting the kingdom of Dahomey in the eighteenth century. *Spirit on the Move* examines more contemporary forms of Christianity in Africa and the Diaspora, focusing on the movement of people of African descent across the Atlantic as well.

Not every chapter involved the African Diaspora—such as Premack’s chapter on the Christ Apostolic Church in Nigeria—but several, such as Aymer’s chapter on West African and Caribbean women evangelists and McAlister’s piece on Pentecostalism in Haiti did involve trans-Atlantic crossings during different time periods.

In the second sense, *Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas* was focused on movement in the context of ceremonies in the New World. The movement of ritual bodies in the Diaspora with African roots was a central theme. In particular, the first part of the book—containing the three chapters by Dewulf, Dawson, and Valerio—provided readers with a sense of central African ritual survivals influencing the movement within festivals in the Americas from New Orleans to Brazil to Mexico. Even *Spirit on the Move*, which is less about ritual performance, has aspects of the movement of bodies, particularly through voice, which can be seen in the third part titled “Sonic Power.” Here Aymer and Casselberry focus on women’s bodies in movement that reestablishes a relationship with God. The power of movement, song, and ritual is inescapable in these two volumes.

Reading them together has been a wonderful experience, with *Spirit on the Move* reminding me of the importance of Pentecostalism in Africa—the fastest growing sector of Christianity in Africa today—while particularly interrogating the often neglected gendered dimension of the movement (with women comprising up to 75 percent of its members). *Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas* too was an amazing collection of essays about the traces of Kongolese Catholicism in the New World, focusing on festivals in particular. It is a great extension of the work by prior scholars of Kongolese Catholicism. I would highly recommend both books, particularly to students of African religion and black feminism, as well as for students of comparative religion and African studies in general.

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