



Revitalizing and Reforming Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Mugambi, Kyama. *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya.* Waco, Texas, USA: Baylor University Press, 2020. Pp. 348 + xvii. US\$59.99 (hardcover).

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The growing story of Christianity in Africa is largely Pentecostal in nature. Yet discourses of Pentecostalism in Africa can tend towards simplistic generalizations or harsh criticisms that are usually blind to the varied textures, contributions and characteristics of Pentecostals in Africa. Dr Kyama Mugambi, Assistant Professor of World Christianity at Yale Divinity School, offers a Kenyan perspective noting the unique features of urban Pentecostalism, its historical antecedents and growth and its influence in shaping Christian leadership in Kenya. Several reasons stand out as to why Kyama is best suited to offer such an account. First is his scholarly heritage. Kyama is son to the religious scholar J. N. K. Mugambi, who has shaped religious, and we might add theological, scholarship in Kenya and throughout Africa. However, Kyama himself has been involved in theological scholarship in the continent in various and distinct ways: his PhD is in World Christianity from Africa International University in Nairobi, under the tutelage of the esteemed Mark Shaw; Kyama directed a publishing house called Africa Theological Network Press (ATNP) for several years; he now teaches and researches at Yale Divinity School, occupying the position of the late Lamin Sanneh. He is also a key figure in various networks of World Christianity such as the Yale-Edinburgh network and the Overseas Ministry Study Centre at Princeton. Second is his significant pastoral experience at *Mavuno* [kiSwahili: 'Harvest']. *Mavuno* is a Kenyan church well known as an urban church planting movement reaching out to the unreached in the city of Nairobi, and now with many churches in key global

Revitalizing and Reforming Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya

**BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya*,
by Kyama Mugambi**

cities. As one of the founding pastors, Kyama has a distinct positionality compared to those who write about Pentecostalism from the outside.

Kyama begins with a clear thesis of retelling the unique story of African (Kenyan) Pentecostalism. Unlike previous critical scholars such as Paul Gifford, who see Christianity as “too self-absorbed to promote progress on a national scale” (3) or on the other side, scholars who focus on North American Pentecostalism, Kyama instead follows scholars like Ogbu Kalu and Walter Hollenweger to Africanize the discourse.¹ Kyama’s unique thesis is that urban Pentecostalism in Kenya retains the unique feature of:

A multigenerational faith engagement that stubbornly offers hope and security in the incessantly volatile, dynamic context on the continent . . . [Pentecostal churches] are not simply imitations of foreign church models but are, rather, relevant iterations of an indigenous Christianity whose history stretches back a century. The churches are historically connected to their predecessors by orality, kinship and African cosmology, three strands which I use to probe this continuity. (4)

Thus, the book looks at urban Pentecostalism in Kenya, and thus African Pentecostalism, through three different lenses, providing a close analysis of what Kyama considers to be “one of the most powerful sociocultural forces shaping the continent” (8).

To be sure, Kyama is also aware of some of “Pentecostalism’s potential for error” (9) which he lists as: First, blurring the boundaries of orthodoxy, for instance in the form of prosperity gospel or the lack of a robust theodicy that can ground Christians in the face of pain, evil, and suffering. Second, Pentecostalism’s close linkages with North American televangelism, which tends towards fundamentalistic Christianity foreign to addressing African social issues. This is seen in Pentecostal concepts such as *upako*, kiSwahili for ‘anointing’, that blindly focuses on the miraculous and supernatural without much emphasis on a practical Christian faith in daily life. Especially articulated in the emerging Word of Faith movement, several criticisms have been offered by African scholars and theologians as a remedy. Lastly, Pentecostalism’s over-spiritualization, while important in engaging with spiritual realities and forces of evil, can tend towards de-emphasizing “unjust societal structures or worldliness” (12) that define African economic and socio-political life. Kyama succeeds in providing a scholarly appraisal of the diversity of African Pentecostal expressions in terms of size, demographics, language, and liturgy. Following the late African missiologist Lamin Sanneh’s analysis of African

¹ E.g., see Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12; Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, Massachusetts, USA: Hendrickson, 1997), 54.

Revitalizing and Reforming Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya
**BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya*,
by Kyama Mugambi**

Christianity, Kyama argues that the *Charismatic movement*, and he uses this term interchangeably with *Pentecostalism*,² has been a process of translating Christian truth in complex ways and in a manner that is “vibrant, missional and spiritually satisfying” (13).³

The Book’s Structure

The book is structured in a way that sustains this ‘African’ argument for Pentecostalism. In chapters 1 and 3, Kyama looks at the emergence of *Roho* (‘Spirit’) churches in early Kenyan Christianity and how they influenced later revivalist and student movements such as FOCUS Kenya. Chapter 1 pays attention to the charismatization debates within colonial-inherited churches, which he sees as a bridge between “African Traditional Religion worldviews and African Christianity” (18). He also considers the East African Revival Movement (EARM) of the 1930s, and its contribution to and distinction with the “Spirit-Roho” movement. Chapters 3 and 4 continue the historical perspective, noting the transition from “missionary dominance into indigenous leadership in historic mission churches” (18). The rise of student movements in the period between 1960 and 1970 facilitated a more cosmopolitan ethos beyond the monoculturalism of mission churches. Another key linkage with the African worldview, Kyama observes, is in orality seen in the practice of giving testimony, or *ushuhuda* (86). Like their Spirit-Roho forebearers, Mugambi argues that revivalist and student movements brought an important concern for the supernatural and miraculous, which mission churches ignored.

Kyama creatively observes the Kenyan post-independent context and identity seen through the slogans of *harambee* (‘let’s pull together’), *tujenge* (‘let us build’), and *pamoja* (‘together’). With this background, the rise of the Newer Pentecostal Churches (NPCCs) is seen as set in the heritage of the EARM and Spirit-Roho churches, but charting a new path, which Kyama says “sought to more fully explore kinship, orality, and holistic religion within the emerging urban context” (90). Kyama honors the parallel revivalistic streams within mission churches in the period, from 1970–1990, of Kenya’s struggle towards

² Other scholars further categorize these into “neo-Pentecostal” and “neo-charismatic” churches. E.g., see Martin Lindhardt, “Introduction: Presence of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in Africa,” chapter 1 in *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Postcolonial Societies*, edited by Martin Lindhardt, 1–53, Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 10.

³ Kyama borrows this definition of translation from Mark Shaw, *Global Awakening: How 20th-Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution* (Downers Grove, Illinois, USA: IVP Academic, 2010), 11, who in turn built on the work of Andrew F. Walls and of Lamin Sanneh.

Revitalizing and Reforming Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya

**BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya*,
by Kyama Mugambi**

multi-partyism and the growth of more ecumenical responses through key figures in the mission historic churches such as the Anglicans Festo Olang' and David Gitari and the Presbyterians Timothy Njoya and John Gatũ. Kyama describes John Gatũ as a revivalist, noting his call for moratorium in the self-deterministic efforts of the indigenous-led Kenyan churches. Kyama also observes the connection between the NPCCs and the youth movements of the day, such as in the Youth Ambassadors Christian Fellowship (YACF) co-founded by key figures in the Pentecostal movement, that is, Joe Kayo, J. B. Masinde, and Mark Kariuki. Other Kenyan churches that fit this mold of the NPCC include the Redeemed Gospel Church (RGC) and Christ Coworkers Church (commonly known as CHRISCO) founded in Nairobi in 1978 by Harry Das (1930–2014), an Asian Indian from Guyana. Their key features are the evangelistic theology of the student movements, healing prayer sessions and ritualistic practices like the use of anointing oil, lack of formal liturgies and creedal statements, and glossolalia, aspects which were different from the historic mission churches.

Chapter 5 focuses on the discipleship approaches of Pentecostal and indigenous churches. Mugambi observes the baptismal practices of the *Akúrinú* and the *Mizizi* bible study that has been synonymous with Mavuno.⁴ I find it creative how Mugambi sees these as contemporary catechism methods in line with the historic church practices in the works of Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Lectures*, Augustine's *Catechizing of the Uninstructed* and much later, the catechisms and confessions of the Reformed tradition, such as the 1563 Heidelberg catechism, the 1647 Westminster Shorter Catechism, and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. However, Mugambi observes that the discipleship models of the Pentecostal churches added their pneumatology to these solid catechism manuals.

Chapter 6 provides the contribution of Pentecostal churches in leadership development of church leaders in the Pentecostal stream, through non-formal educational movements that focused on the giftings of leaders raised up by God. He does this by tracing the journey of one of Nairobi's well-known Pentecostal pastoral leaders, Toni Kiamah of River of God church, through interviews conducted with him. This chapter is informative in its consideration of theological education in Kenya's history by considering the beginning and growth of St Paul's University — which began as a center for training freed-slaves such as the first African student J. R. Deimler in 1888, to the foundation stone at Freire Town, Mombasa by H. K. Binns in 1903, and later as a United

⁴ The *Akúrinú* church, also known as the Holy Ghost Church of Africa, is an AIC founded within the Agikũyũ (Kikuyu) community in Kenya in the 1920s. *Mizizi* means 'roots' in Kiswahili and is the name of the locally produced contextual curriculum used by Mavuno.

Revitalizing and Reforming Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya

**BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya*,
by Kyama Mugambi**

Theological College for the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK), Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA), Methodist Church of Kenya (MCK), and National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) affiliated churches. St Paul's has also trained church leaders from various indigenous, non-denominational, evangelical, and Pentecostal churches. This is an example of the historical strength of the book which, in addition to the archival research of the Church Missionary Society in London, engages with key scholars such as Dickson Nkonge, Esther Mombo, and John Chesworth. Mugambi also looks at Kinara, the pastoral internship program of Nairobi Chapel as an example of the nonformal leadership development that has shaped Pentecostal Christianity in Kenya.

The final two chapters focus on two case studies of influential Pentecostal churches: Christ is the Answer Ministries (CITAM) and Nairobi Chapel. Mugambi shows how CITAM's inception and development has been premised on combining the 'Pentecostal pneumatic impulse' with governance structures. The book presents Nairobi Chapel as an example of appropriating tools available to them, in this case the corporate language of "vision" and "mission" thereby bridging the secular-sacred divide so as to move forward in their missional calling in their urban cultural context that they minister to. Mugambi concludes by noting how his historical analysis casts light on three summative emphases of Pentecostal Christianity, at large, and in Kenya in particular — orality, kinship and holistic religion — as an "extraordinary journey of innovation, creativity, curation and revision on behalf of African people, an important instance of the process of translation and conversion in Christian history" (296).

Evaluation

Kyama Mugambi's *A Spirit of* has several strengths. First, it models a rigorous spirit of careful and creative scholarship. Mugambi uniquely combines sociological, historical, and critical analyses, engaging with a vast array of sources to support his argument. This creative scholarship is also bold in that it seeks to give a different yet informed narrative of Pentecostalism. Second, Mugambi's work is also beneficial to the larger study of African Christianity and even the mission historic churches. Mugambi provides helpful information of key figures in the 'mainstream tradition' such as Gitari, Njoya, and Gatũ, among others who are forerunners and examples of revivalists within Anglican and Presbyterian churches. This book would make wonderful reading especially if paired with John Gatũ's *Fan into Flame* and Timothy Njoya's, *We the People*, for a fuller account of Kenyan Christianity.⁵ Third, this book's tone, while

⁵ John G. Gatũ, *Fan into Flame: An Autobiography* (Nairobi: Moran Publishers, 2016); and

Revitalizing and Reforming Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya

**BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya*,
by Kyama Mugambi**

critical, is constructive in nature. Kyama models the need, especially within the Pentecostal and mainstream debates, for nuanced conversation that moves beyond over-generalizations.

The book has two weaknesses. However, these weaknesses are likely based limitations of scope focusing on providing a historical analysis of Kenyan and urban Pentecostalism. First, I wish the book had expanded on the theology and praxis of urban Pentecostalism. While some of the historical material is unique compared to similar books written by western scholars, what would have been truly new would be a theological analysis of urban Pentecostalism in Kenya. Kyama speaks to some of these issues in bits and pieces throughout the book, but a thorough analysis would provide fodder for academic and lay discussion. For example, elsewhere I have sought to give a critical analysis of the theology and praxis of salvation in Pentecostal Christianity.⁶ This grows from some of the theological impulses discernible in urban Pentecostalism that tend to be reductionistic or overly-materialistic. Arguing in another line, while urban Pentecostalism has contributed to the lived realities of African (Kenyan) social, cultural, political, economic, religious, and spiritual life, does it also tend to focus on only singular aspects of doctrine? In some places, I find the analyses that ‘mainstream’ churches lack a pneumatic focus to be uneven. A quick glimpse at the confessions, catechisms and liturgical practices reveals a holistic pneumatology. Perhaps a middle ground would be to argue that Pentecostalism’s contribution is a focus on the continuationist position of the work of the Spirit, which I think is evident even in mainstream traditions. This brings me to my second point.

Next, I wish Kyama had given more attention to the Charismatization of mission churches. My positionality as a Presbyterian elder shows that a number of these emphases, which Kyama calls as unique in Pentecostalism, have become part of church practices within mainstream churches. Though Kyama does not fall into this error, frequently the terms ‘Pentecostal’, ‘mainstream’, and ‘mission historic’ churches usually serve to entrench certain stereotypes and generalizations, rather than capturing the nuanced and complex nature of African Christianities, both those in the ‘Pentecostal’ and ‘mainstream’ families. Using the kinship language that Kyama uses, I have a hunch that these nuances can provide an example of Christian unity and our shared family heritage rather than drawing wedges that are biased towards human tradition and a spirit of

Timothy Njoya, *We the People: Thinking Heavenly, Acting Kenyanly: A Memoir*, Foreword by Willy Mutunga (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2017).

⁶ Kevin Muriithi Ndereba, “An Exploration of Pentecostal Theology and Praxis of Salvation in Kenya,” chapter 20 in *Salvation in African Christianity*, edited by Rodney L. Reed and David K. Ngaruiya, 381–400 (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2023).

Revitalizing and Reforming Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya*,
by Kyama Mugambi

disunity.

Following this comment, I posit that healthy, contextually and theologically robust African Christianities will emerge from learning from the positives in these two distinct approaches to African Christianities. While mainstream churches in urban centers have grown because of careful transformation of harmful or retrogressive traditions in line with spiritual discernment and charismatization, urban Pentecostal churches have matured through borrowing from the liturgical riches and ordered polity of the mainstream churches. Many within urban Pentecostal churches, for example, are now adorning liturgical vestments and using some form of liturgies in their services. As a practical theologian involved in significant youth work and preaching, I have noticed anecdotally that there are a lot of healthy borrowing and fellowship within Kenyan Christianity. Some Pentecostal churches and revivalist student movements are embracing the practices of expositional preaching which is a staple within the broadly reformed tradition. Likewise, preachers in mainstream churches are making use of story-telling and orality in a way that connects biblically rich sermons to everyday life issues. From a missiological perspective, while the two case studies of CITAM and Nairobi Chapel have contributed to urban and middle-class engagement, other mainstream churches have also contributed in a roundabout way. In the area of youth ministry for example, one of the first appointed youth pastors in the city of Nairobi was at the PCEA St. Andrew's church, an urban mainstream congregation. It is well known that many of the leaders in Pentecostal circles developed their Christian foundation in mainstream churches, as Kyama's own historical background shows. Mainstream churches have also successfully developed inculturated and contextualized theologies that have shaped their ministry within smaller towns and rural villages. Is there something urban Pentecostal churches can learn here, even as they share their urban missiology strengths with the Kenyan church at large? I find these as examples of a charitable approach to Christianity in Kenya, and which Kenyan Christianity can model for global Christianities and theological discourses. While much can be said by way of critiquing each other across the divides, this must be done in a tone of Christian love.

In conclusion, this book is beneficial for those looking for a thick description of urban Christianity in Kenya. The book makes for interesting reading, in terms of its diverse approaches: use of historical sources, contextual linguistic consideration, sociological analyses, personal narratives, and interviews — all of which coalesce to provide a thoughtful, rigorous and helpful text that can be used in a variety of ways and courses. It will make for a good textbook for courses on Pentecostalism, New Religious Movements, Practical Theology, Youth Ministry, Religion in Africa, Church History, Christian Formation, and Christian Leadership, to name but a few.