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Chapter 10

Christian Forms of Religion in Kenya

Yvan Droz & Yonatan N. Gez

Translated by Ellen Kibble, Francesca I. Kleine & Claire Hefty

Introduction

Although Kenya is often considered a Christian country, a Kenyan journalist asserted in 2013 that, “if an opinion poll was conducted to establish how many citizens regularly go to places of worship, the results would frighten the clergy to death. If the researchers were to probe deeper, it might emerge that going to heaven is hardly the reason the few who visit places of worship (to ogle at gorgeous choir members) go there in the first place.” Despite these cynical remarks, several surveys underline the importance of religion for Kenyans. One study by Afrobarometer indicates that 88% of the country’s citizens (85% of men and 90% of women) consider religion to be very important in their lives (Afrobarometer 2011¹). Another survey shows that 80% claim to attend church at least once a week, while 64% participate in religious groups every week (Pew Research Center 2006). In both studies, Kenyans’ religiosity ranked highest among the ten countries surveyed.²

This chapter opens with a historical overview of Christianity in Kenya.³ It then discusses recent transformations in the field of religion, before examining the political role of churches in Kenya. Finally, we describe certain religious practices and show that they are not confined to single religious institutions but instead involve *butinage* or “church hopping.” Such practices are present in various religious forms, and are as much part of Kenyans’ everyday life as they are of their lifelong religious trajectories.

1. The question asked was, “How important is religion in your life?” (question 98B), and possible options included: “Not at all important”; “Not very important”; “Somewhat important”; “Very important”; and “Refused to answer.”

2. The countries that participated in the second survey were the United States, Brazil, Chile, Guatemala, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, parts of India, the Philippines, and South Korea.

3. We have limited our scope to Christianity. According to the 2009 census, Christianity accounts for 82.6% of the population. Historian John Lonsdale claims, evoking “educated ‘guesstimates,’” that 80% of Kenyans were Christian, 7.3% Muslim, and 11.55% “traditionalists” (Lonsdale 2009, 63). For consideration of Islam in Kenya, read Michel Adam’s chapter in this volume, as well as Adam (2010) and Herzig (2006).

1. Christian Religions in Kenya

Three branches of Christianity have played an important role in the evangelisation of central Kenya: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Anglicanism.⁴ Though this division into three branches poses little problem for the Catholics and the Anglicans—the latter being united under the Church of the Province of Kenya (CPK)⁵—the considerable diversity encompassed under the label of “Protestant” makes things less straightforward for the third branch.

Likely the “most important institution” in the country, the Catholic Church remains a significant power in Kenya. The Church’s social engagement—such as parish activities, teaching, and especially healthcare—has contributed greatly to the Church’s success in Kenya. This appeal continues to this day, even though Catholic schools were not considered to be among the best in the country during the colonial period. Additionally, the Church Fathers’ nationalities (French and Italian) allowed them to adopt a position relatively independent from the British colonial government while forcing them to take extreme political caution. This particular feature of Catholicism stood in stark contrast to the stance taken by Protestants and Anglicans, who were tempted by political compromise and were always suspected of supporting the colonisers. The almost marginal political position of Catholicism within a colony of Anglican obedience did not go unnoticed by future converts, who were often more eager to embrace the “religion of the ‘more powerful,’ of those who call the shots, who control the situation and thereby demonstrate their superior strength” (Neckebrouck 1978, 472-473). Today, Catholicism seems to resist the significant loss of followers suffered by other religious groups following the meteoric rise of Pentecostalism.⁶ The explanation for this stability lies not only in the prudent restraint and relative lack of scandals embroiling the Catholic hierarchy, but also in the involvement of Catholic missionaries on the ground,—as well as papal prestige. Protestant puritanism influenced by the East African Revival (which we shall discuss later), however, regards Catholicism as a superficial religion, and suspects it of compromising with traditional religious practices. Some even consider Catholicism to be a cover for “satanic” activities.

4. We were inspired here by Droz (2004), which we have thoroughly revised and updated.

5. Since renamed the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK).

6. According to the 2009 national census, the Kenyan Catholic Church has close to 10 million followers.

A former church of the British state, the Church of the Province of Kenya (CPK⁷) was long seen as the church of the colonisers, and was suspected of complicity with the colonial administration. It is true that the role held by this branch of Christianity throughout the Mau Mau War (1952–1956) left painful scars. Indeed, the Anglican and the Evangelical Churches supported the British army in the “rehabilitation” of the Mau Mau prisoners.⁸ Today, the CPK remains associated with conservative currents, even though it adopts—together with the Presbyterian Church, PCEA—a very critical outlook on Kenyan politics.⁹

Other historic Protestant churches make up nearly a third of Christians in Kenya. The largest among them remains the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA). Unlike Anglicans and Catholics, and despite some exceptions, Presbyterians consider the consumption of tobacco and alcohol as sinful. This prohibition demonstrates the strictness of faith taught by the Presbyterian Church—and, as we will see, by the Pentecostals as well—and explains why these denominations perceive Catholicism as a lax religion.

2. The Independent African Churches in the Wave of Pentecostalism

As in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, missionary churches—particularly Anglican churches, and especially Protestant ones—were subject to schisms that led to the establishment of independent churches. In Kenya, this resulted from clashes concerning clitoridectomy and the quality of education (1928–38),¹⁰ in which the Anglican and Catholic churches supported a moderate position. The diverse movement towards religious independence, equally

7. According to some estimations, the Anglican Church represented almost 10.6% of the population in 2007 (Kagama 2008). This is a significant increase, as statistics presented by David Barrett from the early 1980s indicate that only 7.2% of the population followed this denomination (Barrett 1982). In the latest censuses (2009, 2019), the Anglican Church was integrated into the larger category of “Protestants.”

8. The British put into place an anti-insurrectional strategy inspired by their then-recent experience in Malaysia in order to “bring back” and “rehabilitate” the Mau Mau prisoners. The prisoners passed through a series of camps where Protestant preachers would play an infamous role (Elkin 2005; Maloba 1993).

9. Benson (1995, 195); For a detailed account of Anglicanism in Kenya, see Bowen (2016).

10. The attempt to forbid clitoridectomy in Kikuyu territory was met with fierce resistance that inspired Kikuyus to found the independent schools movement as well as numerous independent Christian churches (Murray 1974; Sandgren 1989; Strayer 1978).

motivated by colonial racism and political activism, coincided with the East African Revival (1936–38), which originated in Rwanda.¹¹ Terence Ranger interprets the emergence of the East African Revival as a reaction from missionary churches which experienced a considerable loss of followers who left to join the independent churches (Ranger 1986, 35). This is true for central Kenya, where the East African Revival offered an alternative to the independent churches. Pentecostalism and independent churches were therefore two sides of the same coin, with both taking a new perspective on conversion and, more generally, on social mobility with a view to achieve personal fulfilment (Droz 1999).

Indeed, the commonalities between these two religious traditions are not confined to the motivations people have for converting to them, but can also be found in numerous doctrinal similarities, and in the emphasis placed on an expression of faith, both emotionally and institutionally (congregationalism). Even if certain “pagan” aspects seem to characterise independent churches, they often follow the same organisational framework, such as with regard to parish independence or the active participation of the congregation in religious services.¹² Moreover, these factions were historically developed in unison until the country’s independence. In the 1920s and 1930s, Pentecostalism was confined to restricted social circles, often composed of settlers. That Pentecostalism emerged from (first wave) “white” North American fundamentalist groups, and was distinguishable from (second wave) “black” American Pentecostalism (Hollenweger 1999). With the arrival of the East African Revival, the Pentecostal movement took off:

“placing an emphasis more on the experience of converting than on religious instruction, [the East African Revival] made itself more accessible to illiterate or poorly educated believers. In addition, its hymns [...] gained great popularity and are often integrated into the ceremonies of other Churches. The third factor in its success is due to the fact that the East African Revival took a decisive stance on lay people (and notably on women), who are freely elected to lead the group. This denomination soon developed affinities with the Pentecostals [...]” (Maupeu 1998).

A second period in the development of Kenyan Pentecostalism can be distinguished, beginning in the 1960s, when the independent churches seemed to experience an equally significant growth following the end of the Mau Mau War. This phase was characterised by the arrival of foreign preachers, most of whom came from North and South America. As demonstrated by the flourishing of the Assemblies of God, these groups

11. The East African Revival was a movement of Protestant revivalism that grew rapidly in neighbouring countries (Peterson 2012).

12. Personal correspondence by Hervé Maupeu, 24 December 1999.

found Kenya to be a fertile ground. During this time, the number of Pentecostal churches in Kenya exploded, as did the number of Protestant missionaries, many of whom were Pentecostal or Evangelical. More recently, the wave of conversion to neo-Pentecostalism¹³ reached Kenya, along with the rest of Africa. The first conversions took place in the early 1980s, and the numbers have been rising ever since. This third wave of Pentecostalism constitutes an important sociological phenomenon that is transforming religious affinities.¹⁴ It came at a time when Kenya faced major political and social upheavals—marked by the democratisation and the liberalisation of the political, economic, and religious markets. The process of registering a new denomination has been greatly simplified, thereby eliciting an explosion in the number of recognised churches.¹⁵

The new Pentecostal missionaries have profoundly transformed Christianity in Kenya.¹⁶ They offer a charismatic liturgy that underlines the importance of being “born again,”¹⁷ and they often emphasise the theology of prosperity. It is important to note that the Born-Again conversion process should not be understood as a phenomenon implicating the entirety of one’s beliefs, but rather as a social practice involved in the construction of multiple identities which prevail in Kenya (Droz 2002). Usually, the new converts would keep their previous religious affiliation after becoming born again, adding a new layer to their multifaceted identity (ethnic, religious, political, socio-economic, etc.) as they reposition themselves within new social networks. Conversions reinforce the social fabric of Pentecostals, as “Jesus is the object of one’s commitment, but the commitment only

13. For a description of neo-Pentecostalism, see Rey (2018) and Anderson (2004). (Neo-)Pentecostalism is an umbrella term for a number of movements that are so different that it is difficult to categorise them under any sort of common label (Anderson 2010).

14. At the end of the twentieth century, there were 126 million Pentecostals in Africa, making up nearly 11% of the population of the continent. The majority converted after 1980 (Barrett 2001, 287).

15. In 2007, the Attorney General of Kenya, Amos Wako, asserted that there were 8,520 recognised churches in Kenya and 6,740 requests for recognition, with around 60 arriving each month (Ndegwa, Alex. 2007. “Over 6,000 Churches Awaiting Registration.” *The Standard*, 4 September).

16. As John Lonsdale has stressed: “in the 1990s Kenya had 1,300 of them [Evangelical missionaries], an astounding figure, twice as many as any other African country, and a second missionisation none would have foretold in 1963” (Lonsdale 2002, 184). According to Paul Gifford, the number of foreign missionaries in Kenya was even higher (Gifford 1994, 519). In 1989, there were 1,225 American protestant missionaries; in 1993, they were 1,337 (out of a total 1,150 missionaries of all nationalities in 1978, 1,850 in 1986, and 2,321 in 1993).

17. Born again are Christians who have accepted a second baptism by immersion.

becomes apparent in social relationships” (Englund 2007, 485). Nevertheless, a person’s conversion can also weaken their prior social relations, as some converts break former solidarities, or give up on participating in family ceremonies henceforth considered as “pagan.”

Today we are seeing a rapprochement between Pentecostalism and Evangelical Protestantism, a shift that has enabled a certain fluidity between independent and Pentecostal churches. Followers are able to alternate between events organised by different denominations with relative ease, as we will see below. At the same time, multiple denominations may come together to collaborate around public Christian “crusades.” Some international evangelists draw enormous crowds to their Pentecostal rallies at Nairobi’s Uhuru Park, and these performances that showcase masterful technical skills (Gifford 1987; 1992; Samita 2004). In addition, American televangelists such as Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, and T.D. Jakes attract numerous followers who watch their television programmes or read their books.¹⁸ Some of them are accused of “stealing” congregants from small independent churches or of subverting their structures in order to “prove” the value of their own evangelist work to their believers in Europe, South Africa, Nigeria, and especially North America. This frenzied quest for followers is further reinforcing the divisions inherent in Pentecostal and independent churches.¹⁹ Ever so often, minor leaders in one church allow themselves to be tempted by the seductive prospect of founding a new denomination, thereby seeing their name inscribed into the annals of Christianity.

These preachers proselytise in the markets, and announce the end of the world, or the imminence of the reign of God, or sometimes the Second Coming.²⁰ They testify to the imminent power of God, promise healings or economic successes, and urge the audience to offer public confessions, so

18. The commitment of these famous evangelists and their congregations in Kenya is not limited to the dissemination of sermons and the occasional crusade, and many Kenyans are regular beneficiaries of evangelistic and development programs funded and led by them. That said, their self-assessment of their work in Kenya is sometimes exaggerated, as we saw in 2013, when the North American evangelist T.D. Jakes was forced to apologise after overestimating the extent of the donations made by his church. He said, “the natives all over Kenya drink water because of this ministry. And the hospital in Nairobi survives because of this ministry.” Karanja, Antony. 2013. “US Pastor TD Jakes Apologises over Kenya Comments.” *Daily Nation Online*, 18 October. <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/us-pastor-td-jakes-apologises-over-kenya-comments-905700> [archive].

19. We recall that these fissures are not new, and that they have studded the history of Christianity in Kenya, and elsewhere (Neckebrouck 1983).

20. An era promised to the Righteous, after the second coming of Christ, according to the Apocalypse (20: 16).

that they may be to be “saved” by receiving baptism by the Holy Spirit. Like pre-colonial African prophets, some predict future events or “explain”—armed with biblical passages—extraordinary accidents or natural disasters.

Additionally, many of these Pentecostal preachers seek to carry out all of the signs indicated in the Bible to hasten the Second Coming of the Messiah (Droz 2001). This atmosphere of exalted expectation of the Second Coming is equally expressed in the numerous Pentecostal publications sold in the streets, outside the religious services of many provocatively named Pentecostal churches: Maximum Miracle Centre, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Jesus Is Alive Ministries, Glory of Christ Ministry, Power of Jesus Around the World, and so on. These publications announce upcoming “crusades” and peddle signs for the end of times: The Antichrist lives among us and tempts the faithful by the means of false prophets; the “Y2K bug” proved that the power of God remains superior to the miraculous technologies of Man; the Mark of the Beast is concealed in barcodes, revealed to those who inspect closely and, through numerological calculations, identify the infamous 666; dead children are revived after the laying on of hands by valiant preachers; the 1998 attack on the American embassy in Nairobi was an attempt by Satan’s supporters to weaken the soldiers of Christ; the inauguration of a Hindu temple in Nairobi is a worrying sign of the power of idolaters (S  raphin 2003). In short, there are many Kenyans who live in a world re-enchanted by the apocalyptic teachings of Pentecostal movements.

The certainty of bearing witness to the millennium quickly leads to performative social practices, as they can be akin to self-fulfilling prophecies. The millennium thus takes a prosaic form, with the faithful hoping to see non-believers punished so that they themselves might enjoy the very concrete fruits promised to the faithful disciples of this exacting faith. In other words, such Pentecostals live in a (re-)enchanted world where the hand of God (as well as that of Satan) is omnipresent and where miracles and sinful temptations co-exist in daily life. They believe that the times they are living correspond to the early days described in the Bible, those following the birth of Christ, and when the effusion of the Holy Spirit embraced the apostles.

In recent years, we have seen these spiritual ideas give way to ambitious plans to transform Kenyan society. Many Pentecostal movements have abandoned their reticence of “worldliness,” and openly engage in politics to promote a programme that some have qualified as “politics of the spirit” (Marshall 2009; Steigenga 2001; Villafa  e 1996; Yong 2010). They maintain that their religious ideals could surpass earthly woes and promote a moralisation of political life, such as through the rejection of corruption, adherence to Christian values, etc. This new political involvement, which

is informed by a clear division between good and evil, could be considered as a form of pentecostalisation of the public sphere, which would clean up Kenyan politics and to bring morals back to political life (Parsitau 2008).

Despite such ambitions for society in general, a large part of Pentecostal entrepreneurship manifests itself in the opening of small denominations (often micro-denominations) that start off with grandiose ambitions, but ultimately remain active only locally. As Paul Gifford notes, Pentecostalism has seen the emergence of a “new class of religious professionals, that is to say the founders/owners/religious leaders” (Gifford 2009, 154; Gez & Droz 2021). Unlike the priests of historic churches, these entrepreneurs do not enjoy the support of a recognised church platform, nor do they possess formal theological training. As Ruth Marshall points out with regards to Nigerian Pentecostalism, “While various forms of institutionalised accreditation exist, pastoral authority is represented as inhering in a personal call from God; anybody with a vision can start a church, a fellowship, or a mission, and they do” (Marshall 2009, 12; see also Corten & Marshall-Fratani 2001, 5). In Kenya, Pentecostal churches are so numerous that the national office cannot keep up with the rate of applications, even as the majority of churches probably do not seek official registration.

The arrival on the religious scene of these new entrepreneurs with no theological training has thrown into question the separation between social, political, economic and religious aspects of life; so much so that it is often said that “religion has become just like a business.” Founding a religious movement is therefore often considered to be a means of building up a political clientele and satisfying preachers’ thirst for power.²¹ In the eyes of many, Kenyan Pentecostals have lost their moral credentials in recent years due to repeated financial and sexual scandals (Gez & Droz 2015). Some people feel that the political projects of the Pentecostal movement do not represent a viable alternative to the current political system, but are simply a means for leaders to insert themselves into it. Consequently, Pentecostals are considered to be “among the most enterprising entrepreneurs of the

21. The case of the Pentecostal bishop Margaret Wanjiru of the Jesus is Alive Ministries (JIAM) is edifying. She was elected to Parliament in 2007 for the ODM in the Starehe Constituency, but then lost her seat in 2013. Despite largely mobilising her followers through her sermons, the scandals which had enveloped her proved to be fatal. Though her claims that almost 20,000 voters in Starehe were from her flock are no doubt exaggerated, they underline her church followers’ role in her 2007 success (Kareithi, Amos. 2006. “Bishop Wanjiru Hopes to Be President.” *The Standard*, 5 November. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200611060988.html>). In January 2013, shortly before the election, she said from the pulpit that, “if you do not know who to vote for, call the numbers on the screen and we will tell you who to vote for” (JIAM morning service, 13 January 2013). See Gez & Alvis (2015).

religious world” (Anderson 2004, 280), and the absence of any centralised institutional structure further heightens the appeal of individual initiatives. Today, it is common to hear the inhabitants of Nairobi make remarks such as, “to become a pastor nowadays, all you need is a Bible and a suit.” Under such conditions, it is not surprising that Pentecostalism’s social and political long-term impact remains uncertain.

3. Churches and the Pluralist Elections

Since the return of a multi-party political system in 1991, each of the six general elections that have been held have revealed a different state of Kenyan civil society (Droz & Maupeu 2013; Maupeu 1998). In the late 1980s, a number of civil society actors criticised the repression of Moi’s dictatorial regime and its totalitarian inclinations: tight control of the *corps intermédiaires* (political parties, trade unions, employers, etc.), rising numbers of political prisoners, political persecution, and surveillance. In the elections of 1988, a new voting process that required voters to line up behind their candidate, and the marginalisation of certain ethnic groups, shocked many high-profile civil society leaders. Some ministers stood up against these trends and criticised the voting system. In close collaboration with human rights lawyers, they backed the politicians persecuted for demanding free, multi-party elections. Following intense international pressure, President Moi—who threatened that ethnic unrest would befall the country following the abandonment of the single-party system—authorised new political parties, which were created under the patronage of the main Churches. During this period, the opposition party utilised religious establishments and disseminated its messages through Christian networks. But the political class quickly sought to free itself of this religious tutelage, and during the electoral campaign of 1992, the clergy was ostensibly left aside. Despite its divisions, the opposition was confident about winning the elections. However, the re-election of President Moi and the decisive victory of his party forced the opposition politicians to reconsider their strategy, and their means for expanding their electoral base.

In 1992 and 1993, the main churches worked to accommodate almost one hundred thousand refugees fleeing massacres in the Rift Valley. These ethnic cleansings were denied by the authorities, who were complicit in (if not the actual authors of) the killings (Maupeu 1997). The state and the ruling elite ignored the dramatic situation in the Rift Valley, while the administration hindered the relief efforts of Christian organisations. During this humanitarian crisis, the opposition unconvincingly denounced the massacres, creating a rupture between the political class, religious forces, and human rights NGOs. Five years later, human rights associations dictated the agenda and the themes of the electoral campaign of 1997.

As early as 1996, some activists mobilised a diverse public to propose a reform of the Constitution. Many Protestant and Catholic opinion leaders supported the constitutional reform from the ground up. Nevertheless, these attempts were unsuccessful and only superficial modifications were introduced to the Constitution, tailor-made to favour President Moi's re-election in 1997.

The same year, the opposition organised huge demonstrations in order to demand a change to the Constitution before the elections. Convinced by the success of these mobilisations, an ailing opposition attempted to recapture some of the momentum that had been generated. Once again, politicians joined the opposition party, working with the Catholic and Protestant Churches. However, six months before the vote, the demonstrations escalated due to increased police persecution, and demonstrators were beaten inside the Anglican Cathedral in Nairobi. Faced with the number of casualties and the risk of anarchy, the clergy and several opposition leaders negotiated with the authorities, further marginalising the leaders of the social movement. As a result, Christian organisations have long alienated human rights NGOs and many lawyers (Maupeu 2001).

In 2002, the Churches hardly appeared in the national electoral campaign. Most of them supported the opposition, but their commitment was mostly felt at the local level, where they organised the primary round of voting for certain parties and endorsed their candidates at religious ceremonies. Thus, with the exception of the AIC²² and some Pentecostal movements, the Christians strongly supported Mr Kibaki and his party, whose victory was also theirs. The new regime cleverly appointed several high-ranking clergy members to committees which were essentially well-paid sinecures. Hence, these leaders did not look for a reason to criticise the new governmental team (Maupeu, Musambayi & Mitullah 2005).

In the 2005 constitutional referendum, the churches uncritically defended the modification of the country's constitution, which were swept away by the voters. In the 2007 elections, the Catholic elite ostensibly supported the re-election of Mwai Kibaki. The National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), which acts as the umbrella organisation for the country's Protestant Churches, seemed to lose its neutrality when its leader ran in the legislative elections under the banner of the President's party. Furthermore, many religious leaders, particularly among the Pentecostals, decided to enter the race for a seat in Parliament, encouraged by the rejection of the 2005 draft of the Constitution (Cheeseman 2008; Kavulla 2008; Gez & Alvis 2015; Gifford 2009; Droz & Maupeu 2013). Thus, the 2007—as well as the 2013—elections saw a tidal wave of Pentecostal candidates, many of whom

22. The African Inland Church broke away from an evangelical mission originated in the East Coast of the United States.

came from neo-Pentecostal currents, which preach involvement in world affairs and advocate entrepreneurship through their theology of prosperity. In 2010, a new version of the Constitution was submitted for referendum and was eventually accepted. However, heated debates on the religious issues addressed in the Constitution draft—like the legalisation of abortion and the autonomous status of the Khadi Courts for the Muslims of Kenya—underlined the influence of the Christian lobby (Osur 2011).

The elections of 2013 raised fears of a recurrence of the 2008 post-electoral violence that had inflamed the whole country and left more than 1,500 dead. Back then, some religious leaders had played incendiary roles by violently supporting their own candidate and fuelling tensions between different communities, showing that the churches had grievously failed to play their role as peacemaker. Having largely learned from these tragic events, they developed programmes to promote national unity and to successfully prevent future violence. For example, many ecumenical prayer meetings were organised and widely reported in the media. In an interfaith meeting broadcast on television, Bishop David Oginde of the Nairobi Pentecostal Church (NPC) pointed out that the use of churches as electoral stepping-stones by politicians had been sharply curtailed: “If you compare this year with the 2007 [elections] for example, you hardly notice any church group or any church leader that are praying for, endorsing any particular candidates. [...] We had a meeting and we agreed [that] we pray generally for the elections to be peaceful, we pray for our members who are campaigning that God may go before them, but that is [a] general prayer” (Citizen TV, 16 February 2013). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these measures is still open to question, given that the forum of Muslim chiefs supported the candidacy of Raila Odinga, while Uhuru Kenyatta was backed by the association of Muslim organisations.²³

The latest elections in 2017, which saw Uhuru Kenyatta’s victory in the first round of voting, did not give rise to much public intervention from the churches, contrary to what we have seen in previous elections.²⁴

4. Religious *Butinage* in Kenya

We met Charles in August 2014, near Kisumu on the shores of Lake Victoria in Western Kenya. At thirty years old, he was living with his wife, and their three children. His parents, both members of Legio Maria (Kustenbauder

23. Alongside the commitment of the historic churches in electoral politics, other religious forces played an influential role, such as neo-traditionalist religious movements.

24. Perhaps we can see here the results of the ecumenism created by religious *butinage*. See Droz & Gez (2019).

2009)—his mother, a born catholic, had to convert in order to marry her husband—brought him to Kisumu at a young age. His birth was difficult and considered as a miracle brought about by the prayers of the members of Legio Maria. His mother was admonished that Charles “at all times should be in Legio, should not walk out of Legio.” He remained in this denomination for many years, becoming a devout “mass child.” However, as the demands of his church his church precluded him from studying, he left it in secondary school. But his life was not easy—he passed from odd job to odd job, and his house was burgled. For his family, all these troubles were the result of him leaving Legio Maria, in contravention of the prophecy of his birth. They attempted in vain to convince Charles to return to their church. But his woes did not end there. Charles suffered several accidents before meeting a young Luo man in a park in Mombasa, who invited him to join his small Pentecostal church. Although he really enjoyed this church for a while, Charles became exasperated by the political turn the sermons took before the 2007 elections. He left this church and returned to Kisumu.

He then approached another church, Deliverance Church, but soon left it following institutional quarrels (the central leadership accused its Kisumu branch of siphoning off money from the tithe) in order to join another Pentecostal denomination led by a white reverend. However, the reverend asked him to testify on his behalf before the police, which irritated Charles: “I’m sorry for this, [but] one of my objectives of coming to church was to pray, not to do [court] cases. I’m sorry, I’m not coming to that.” After some time, the institutional quarrel was resolved, and Charles’ wife, as well as his children, returned to Deliverance Church where they remain today.

Thinking of the succession of misfortunes that had befallen him, Charles admits that he sometimes believed that he was cursed by members of his family. In fact, Charles dreaded returning to his home village for fear of witchcraft. He explained that he would never go to consult a witchdoctor for help, but he admitted to having asked a preacher to pray for him, in order to protect him from spells, with little success. He complained of false preachers, of the many preachers who divert money from the Church or who take advantage of their congregation. Nevertheless, he insisted that “back in the day,” the members of Legio Maria were truly animated by the Holy Spirit: “We the people, we’ve walked away from God. People [today] want to do their things, there is despair, desperate, we want money, and the people who know God’s matter, people who are eloquent, who understand God’s word, they also seem to take advantage of the same, just to extort money from the people.” Charles feels demoralised by the attitudes of today’s pastors and admits to not having attended church in more than a year. Before that, he visited several denominations, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses, without remaining at any for long. He now says he is drawn to

Catholicism, having enjoyed the Catholic services he attended in Mombasa with his maternal uncle. However, he has clashed with his wife over this, as she remains deeply committed to Deliverance Church. Having recently bought a television set, he spends his Sunday mornings “church zapping”—that is, channel-hopping from one religious station to another.

How can we understand a story like Charles’, so varied and yet not unfamiliar to the people of Kenya? Statistics tell us a part of the story. According to the most recent census data from 2019, Kenya’s population of 47.6 million consists of 85.5% Christian (33.5% Protestant, 20.6% Catholic and 20.4% Evangelical) and 11% Muslims. The census respondents had to choose a single response out of the eight provided, though we observe that it is common for many people to participate in the services of several denominations. Of course, the census did not consider the degree of involvement in religious services either: is it a formal and recognised affiliation, a constant participation in a religious service without formal affiliation, an episodic participation, or an occasional visit? Finally, knowing that in Kenya it is frowned upon not to declare a religious affiliation, it is highly possible that respondents claimed an affiliation even if it is barely, if at all, practised. In this respect, it is noteworthy that almost a million Kenyans still affirm an absence of religion affiliation.

Nevertheless, though religious identity is strongly influenced by religious institutions, it is not limited to them. Religious identities in Kenya are polymorphous and highly variable. Social science researchers have demonstrated—by evoking the concept of “lived religion” (Hall 1997; McGuire 2008; Roof 2001)—that religious practices transcend institutional boundaries. For their part, Kenyans often declare that “God is one” and that religious practices depend on personal preferences or pragmatic and contextual considerations, insofar as they keep to the realm of Christianity. In her master’s thesis, Elisabeth Wafula (2003, 106-107), a Kenyan, states:

Previously, people attended a Church because of their loyalty to the congregation. Even if the Church was not ministering to their needs, they remained because of their sense of duty. Nowadays, people hop from Church to Church depending on their particular needs and available programs within the Church which minister to their needs. Their identity within the Church is no longer [sic] based upon the past, but upon the contributions the Church makes on their lives and families. This has indeed brought pressure upon most Churches to develop multiple ministries resulting into inter-denomination [sic] mobility.²⁵

25. Wafula’s thesis relies on the results of the study done by the Nairobi Urban Integration Research Project. The data were collected in the early 2000s from 1,535 people in Nairobi. 457 among them (30%) claimed to have changed religious denomination at least once since birth.

A more refined approach to religious identities in Kenya, such as Charles', therefore requires acknowledging a relative fluidity of participation in religious services, as well as a significant mobility of affiliations, both at present, as Wafula indicates, and likely also in the past (Neckebrouck 1978; 1983; Peterson 1996; 2000; Chanson, Droz, Gez & Soares 2014). Kenyans can adopt a denomination that they consider to be the core of their affiliation, while maintaining more "peripheral" links to other religious forms, and can equally participate in circular religious mobility, or go back and forth between churches.

It is therefore possible in Kenya to distinguish between "visits" to religious services and affiliation to a church. This distinction highlights the possibility of combining simultaneous engagement in different forms of participation in religious services with the existence of a hierarchical difference between them. The affiliation remains at the heart of belonging to a faith, both declared and experienced, while visits represent a "secondary," often exploratory, form of participation. They are generally institutionalised and often follow an established protocol (Gez & Droz 2017). Nevertheless, such mobility can turn into "church hopping," a notion describing a person's lack of stable affiliation as a solid primary affiliation is not maintained. An individual may be suspected of changing affiliation to create dissension or to seek financial or sexual interests. Some, like Charles, prudently limit their participation in religious services and stay at home to watch the ceremonies of various Christian television programmes, or to follow the virtual "crusades" of the televangelists, and consequently are less involved in "church hopping" than they are in "church zapping." For example, a Kenyan journalist presents the story of a lady called Christine Ndegwa, "a Christian who prefers watching sermons on television to attending church." Ndegwa explains her preferences by alluding to discontent with contemporary pastors, who she sees as living a lavish, immoral lifestyle, while their congregations languish in poverty. During our research in Nairobi, we heard several people give similar examples. In Kenya, there are many religious television channels such as Family TV, and international religious stations are equally available. Some religious programmes also broadcast on private channels. While "church zapping" could come from disillusionment with today's preachers, it could also be a means of coping with the demands of wage employment, as waiters or receptionists who work on Sundays can also "participate" in religious services, just like taxis drivers who listen to these radio programmes while on the road.²⁶

26. Okeyo, Verah. 2013. "Preaching to the Converted: The Rise of Atheism in Modern Kenya." *Daily Nation—DN2*, 3 July: 2-3. <https://nation.africa/kenya/life-and-style/dn2/the-rise-of-atheism-in-modern-kenya-872868> [archive].

Such observations emphasise that taking religious practices into account requires us to go beyond the “theological” notion of a singular religious affiliation, which suggests a strict adherence to explicit institutional prescriptions. Rather, the concept of “religious *butinage*” (named after the French term for the foraging movement of bees while gathering pollen) makes it possible for us to account for these fluid and varied religious practices. To discuss religious *butinage* is also to examine the social practices and the “*manières de faire*” (“ways of doing,” de Certeau 1980) within the religious field, and to thus document religious practices that too often go unnoticed: switching from one denomination to another, participating in several churches at once without formally adhering to any one, partaking in prayer circles that bring together practitioners of various denominations, channel-hopping between televised sermons, etc. The Abrahamic religions offer a representation of the religious and of religious practices that favours the dichotomy between believers and unbelievers. Any view to the contrary is perceived as a deviation from orthodoxy. However, religious *butinage*’s *manière de faire* acknowledges the everyday mobility of the practitioner as irreducible to institutional prescriptions.

The practice of religious *butinage* takes religion into account as a practice of (re)production of social relations (neighbourhood, friendships, etc.) but also of meaning. The practice of *butinage* may thus be interpreted as allowing Kenyans to accumulate religious resources that offer them certain securities in the face of the ever-changing field of religion—in which schisms, collapses, and fusions of religious movements are frequent, as are suspicions of abuse of power by religious dignitaries (Droz 1997; Gez & Droz 2015). Religious *butinage*, or multiple practices, allows for diverse ways of worship to be preserved in case one’s primary, or initial, denomination descends into political or financial scandal, or an individual’s religious identity transforms in light of lived experience such as geographic mobility. Religious identity is in a constant process of renegotiation.

Speaking of religious *butinage* also takes into account the entanglement of the religious world with the secular one (Soares 2009; Soares, Droz & Gez 2012; Droz, Soares & Oro 2014; Droz, Soares, Gez & Rey 2016; Droz & Gez 2019). Consequently, in order to avoid seeing their followers stray into the sins of popular entertainment (alcohol, sex, disco, cinema, etc.), the Christian churches offer religious services that are sometimes akin to a “show” with musical and theatrical production values on par with those of professional performers.

Emphasising the blending of the secular and the religious allows us to show that the latter is not only a place of spiritual engagement, but also a place of socialisation, recreation, and pleasure (Bayart 2014). Many of our interlocutors remarked that the Sunday religious services are very engaging

and that they take pleasure in going because the church is “where things happen.” Additionally, for the many inhabitants of Nairobi with limited financial resources, the leisure activities offered by the capital remain inaccessible, meaning that religious services are also seen as an affordable entertainment and a way to “pass the time.”

Conclusion

Since colonisation, Christian churches in Kenya have helped to make sense of a world in constant upheaval by offering opportunities for social advancement, through education or politics, and by achieving (at least partially) some of their promises of development (Droz 2016). This chapter has highlighted the range of perspectives taken by established religious denominations, first in the face of British powers and later under independent rule. The country’s religious leadership played sometimes-contradictory roles confronting the ruling power, before engaging in the game of representative democracy during the 2007 and 2013 elections at the risk of losing their independence.

This commitment to secular politics was further reinforced by the establishment of numerous Pentecostal churches. New religious movements (whether they represent independent African churches emerging out of missionary churches or Pentecostal movements) have profoundly transformed the religious landscape of Kenya. In recent years, the wave of neo-Pentecostalism and missionary work (mostly by American preachers) has further intensified this process. So much so that, according to a Kenyan journalist, “From the 1970s to date, what was and what is are now worlds apart.”²⁷ These changes can be seen in the “Pentecostalisation” of Kenyan Christianity, to the extent that Pentecostal teachings are today shared by many established churches.

But outside the institutional confines of Kenyan religious forms, it appears that the “faithful” are much more than that: their religious commitments, whether visiting other churches or their primary religious affiliation, transcend institutionalised identities and practices. Kenyans like Charles move freely within the religious landscape to build their often-polymorphic and composite religious identities. The study of religious denominations should therefore not be limited to institutional dynamics such as the political actions of the church and their official discourses. Research should equally take into account the social norms and actual practices of the congregants, who oscillate between their primary religious

27. Oduor, Peter. 2013. “The Kenyan Church and the Gospel of Prosperity.” *Daily Nation—DN2*, 13 February: 2-3. <https://nation.africa/kenya/life-and-style/dn2/the-kenyan-church-and-the-gospel-of-prosperity--847652> [archive].

affiliation and multiple visits, not to mention the practice of “religious *butinage*” or “church zapping” on television. The dynamics of these practices go beyond the institutional prescriptions and offer a new research horizon for analysing religious practices in Kenya and elsewhere.

If we attempt to predict the future of these institutional, personal, and political religious dynamics, one might evoke the relatively recent emergence of questions about the possibility of no longer affiliating with any single church, or recognise the absence of commitment to a religion. Even if statistics are not very reliable, Kenyans have a sense that “the number of families who have no affiliation with any religion is growing.”²⁸ Some have argued that this tendency could be explained by the appearance of a middle class, whose higher rates of education promotes a “scientific” representation of the world and a critical spirit, reinforced by access to new means of electronic communication.²⁹ Moreover, this trend might equally be associated with the numerous scandals that affected multiple religious leaders and their churches. This caused a certain disillusionment affecting church leaders and self-proclaimed prophets, who are overly preoccupied by very secular things: money, sex and power. Whatever this trend means and wherever its supposed causes may lie, it underlines the intense mobility—of religion, politics, or identity—within the religious landscape of Kenya, and its members.

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28. Wangeri, Perpetua. 2014. “Give Me That Old Time Religion.” *The People–Fusion*, 18 May: 30–31.

29. Ibid.; Okeyo, Verah. 2013. “Preaching to the Converted: The Rise of Atheism in Modern Kenya.” *Daily Nation–DN2*, 3 July. <https://nation.africa/kenya/life-and-style/dn2/the-rise-of-atheism-in-modern-kenya-872868> [archive].

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