CHAPTER NINE

MIGRANT ANGLICAN IDENTITY IN CONGO

Introduction

[Ugandans] announce[d] Christ to the inhabitants of Boga... From there, the work expanded rapidly under African direction into many regions of Zaire. Thus the prophetic word of Apolo on his deathbed was fulfilled, “Bury me with my head towards the West so that the work of the Lord will continue.”... the Anglican Church of Zaire has been planted through several waves of immigration.¹

The reported prophetic last wish of Apolo Kivebulaya, “Bury me with my head towards the West...” are the words which began this book. They are found in all narratives of Apolo’s life, including the EAC centenary pamphlet of 1996 quoted above where they are used to interpret the migratory nature and African agency of EAC growth since its inception. This final chapter analyses the use of this narrative by migrants to construct a new sense of ‘home’ as a place where meaning is grounded. It then presents an overview of the EAC migratory identity shifts indicating the importance of the conclusions for studies in Sub-Saharan Christian history.

Narrating Home

Throughout this book, the narration and re-interpretation of Apolo’s life and death have been observed to shape and to reflect EAC identity. From early eyewitness accounts, through hagiography and oral myth, the founder of the EAC was used to supply meaning to the church as it developed. The influence of church founders and the myth-making of their lives has been acknowledged in African Initiated Churches² but less scholarly attention has been given to the founders of main-line churches. Founders give unique identity to their churches. The

particularities of their lives provide the basis for narrating an identity that cannot be exactly replicated by other groups. Whereas the likes of Simon Kimbangu are remembered for their differences with mainline Christianity, even if those differences may have been less acute than the popular perception of them, Apolo is remembered for his successful introduction of a mainline mission church in a way which glosses over difference or difficulty.

The various interpretations of Apolo’s burial story present a prime example of the use of narrative in constructing identity. Different groups interpreted his story in various ways, plotting it with significant hermeneutical terms in order to select and interpret their identity. The story was used to uphold escarpment utaratibu with its upole and heshima (chapter two), to implant escarpment utaratibu elsewhere and make a home-from-home (chapter three), to give credence to a previously unknown church (chapter four), to support revival and itinerant evangelism (uhuru) (chapter six), and to endorse women’s ordination (maendeleo) (chapter seven). By the 1990s, migrant Anglicans no longer interpreted Apolo’s story with hermeneutical terms that presented the church as a conservative, rural, gerontocratic institution, largely influenced by one ethnic group, in which hierarchy and liturgy mirrored dominant social powers to which others were expected to show due deference. Geographical spread, numerical growth, and the resultant variety of life experience by members altered the identity of the church. Utfaritibu was plotted with events surrounding the northern migration and the experience of second-generation migrants, and thus interpreted by perceptions of maendeleo, uhuru, umoja and furaha, remaining an important identity signifier but challenged by the juxtaposition of other signifiers. So Apolo’s story was employed to give meaning to the increasingly urbanised identity and the growing national, female- and youth-orientation. Apolo’s role as identity signifier was no longer that of the guardian of escarpment utaratibu, he had become the symbol of EAC umoja. As a permanent symbol for EAC members, he mitigated the tension between continuity and change, or between utaratibu and uhuru.

The 1996 pamphlet narrates the story of Apolo in such a way as to imbue EAC history with unitary aim and a narrative umoja unique to the EAC and yet linking it to Uganda and beyond. The excerpt quoted above states that Africans brought the Christian message in an Anglican form to the Semeliki escarpment yet they were Africans who crossed cultural, linguistic and colonial boundaries to do so. This pattern repeated itself through migratory growth as Apolo himself expected it would. Apolo’s dying wish is thus interpreted as a prophecy