Ruy Llera Blanes

The book by Ruy Llera Blanes presents a complex study of the Angolan Tokoist churches both in Angola and especially of their diaspora community in Lisbon, Portugal. The largest Tokoist church is currently pushing towards greater public visibility through mediatisation and an immense building portfolio thereby providing an intriguing case study for the analysis of postcolonial dynamics, modernisation and globalisation. In a recent article in the Journal of Religion in Africa (40. 2010, 2), Paul Kollmann expressed his concern that the current emphasis on the study of Pentecostal churches is clouding our understanding of the vast variations of African Christianities with their specific theologies, institutional structures and ways of dealing with modernisation, migration and global awareness. Blanes answers this call in an exemplary manner with a—most welcome—example from the Lusophone world. He thereby engages fruitfully with such diverse academic fields as narrative theory, postcolonial studies, world Christianity and studies in mediatisation.

The central question for Blanes is: how does a movement described initially as ‘regional’ within the early paradigm of Congolese prophetism transcend generations and continents to become part of global modernity? Blanes takes the biography of the founding prophet, Simão Toko, as focal point to study the unfolding of narrative historisation during the expansion of the movement. The central argument is that narrated biographies and histories are ideological reconstructions by various authors and at cross-purposes. Blanes argues cogently that while narrative biographies are always part of individual identities, they are also part of collective identities as biographical narrative regimes:

There are other biographical modalities that persist precisely given the social, shared, created and disputed character [...]. Such is the case, for instance, of prophetic biographies, which reveal how particular religious movements emerge from the intersection between individuality and sociality, motivated by dynamics of leadership and charisma [...] (p. 45).

The metaphor of “re-remembrance” (Port.: relembramento, p. 19) is taken as a starting point for explaining the emic conflation of past and future into a teleological theology of Tokoism. The idea of a ‘trajectory’ in the title of the book sums up very neatly the idea of a dynamic heritage which remains part of an
unfolding present. Blanes’s chapters follow his analytical strategy by presenting in part I (“Itineraries”) a reconstruction of salient elements of the prophet’s biography as narrated by the two largest Tokoist churches and including private information from the daughter. In part II (“Trajectories”), Blanes builds up a complex image of these biographical narratives as identificatory heritage among the practitioners within the church. The planes of analysis include ritual space and time, questions of political leadership and dissent and, finally, the effects of migration on the theology of the church.

In chapter 3, Blanes takes a look at the materialisation and mediation of the narrative biographical regime surrounding Simão Toko in the Sunday liturgy, the hymns, the spiritual interventions of (minor) prophets and sacred space in the churches. In this chapter, Blanes applies recent analytical models from material religion, semiotics and embodied learning (Engelke, Kirsch, Keane, Berliner and others). Blanes underlines the emic appresentation of a narrative past throughout the entire book with the simple rhetoric device of shifting to the present tense whenever historic events are part of the Tokoist biographical narrative regime. This is a creative idea to translate aesthetic experiences into plain text, but is nevertheless slightly awkward for the reader.

Chapter 4 presents a central topic of interest for all Weberians and scholars interested in the shift within prophetic movements from the charismatic founding figure to the second generation of leaders. After the death of Toko in 1984, the church split into several churches. Not long after some of these churches were politically recognised after decades of persecution. Around the turn of the millennium, this tense situation produced a new charismatic leader incorporating—and thus re-narrating—the spirit of the founding prophet, Simão Toko, himself. Routinisation was thus combined with re-charismatisation in the figure of the new leader.

In chapter 5, Blanes attention shifts to the Lisbon diaspora community of the Tokoist churches. Within the analytical framework of migration and diaspora studies, Blanes presents a very lucid account of the shift towards an international (or at least Portuguese) identity for the Angolan church members. Although academic analyses of Nigerian Aladura and Pentecostal churches as well as Orisha religion in the diaspora (Adogame, Ukah, ter Haar, Olupona etc.) are not taken up by Blanes, his argument certainly resounds with their recent findings on global re-identification of formerly localised religious movements. Such a perspective is particularly welcome because it shifts analytical attention away from a binary model of ‘colonial masters’ and ‘colonial subjects’ towards a more nuanced model of multiple agencies, aesthetic functions and political inconsistencies (for further studies see the special issue in JRE 4. 2011, 3). One thread of argument that runs through the entire book concerns the ambivalent