Ruy Llera Blanes

A Prophetic Trajectory: Ideologies of Place, Time and Belonging in an Angolan Religious Movement. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014, xiv + 234 pp., illus., Hdbk, $90.00/£55.00, isbn 978-1-78238-272-0.

This is a study of a religious movement that originally emerged in the Lower Congo region, where its founder was born in 1918. It developed rapidly in the 1940s in neighbouring Angola, at a time when that country was in the process of transition from being a Portuguese colony to gaining political independence. The movement became known as the Tokoist Church, after its founder Simão Gonçalves Toko, to whom the book is also dedicated.

Historically, the Tokoist Church can be seen as part of the wider movement of African independent churches in southern Africa, about which much has been written ever since Sundkler’s pioneering study in 1948. Most of this literature concerns anglo- and francophone Africa, and it is the great merit of this study that it introduces us to an important lusophone movement, purportedly the largest one in Angola after the Catholic Church, and today with overseas branches in Europe as a result of migration.

The aim of the author is to revive the church’s ‘forgotten history’, to reveal and almost literally re-construct it in order to show the movement’s social, cultural and particularly political significance in Angola’s longer and wider history. To that end, the author has done wonderful historical and empirical research, retracing the history of the church from its beginnings through the various phases in the personal vocation of its founder and prophet Simão Toko, whose personal spiritual itinerary seems to mirror the political trajectory that eventually turned Angola into an independent nation-state. Like other prophetic movements of that time in central Africa – a notable example being the Kimbanguists – the Tokoists were considered politically subversive by the powers of the day and therefore kept under close scrutiny. One of the most interesting sources used by the author are the records kept by PIDE, the Portuguese secret police. The way in which processes of spiritual transformation impact on a simultaneous process of political transformation, and vice-versa, is shown by the author with sensitivity, as he is intent on including the collective memory of the Tokoists, and the ‘history of suffering’ that is an existential part of it, into the larger project. He is thus able to weave an ‘alternative history’ into the history of Angola, by way of an epistemological exploration that takes its starting point in the history of the Tokoist movement.

In view of this it is all the more regrettable that such excellent research is couched, rather counter-productively, in a conceptual language that obscures rather than illuminates the meaning and relevance of the Tokoist movement.
This is the language of postmodern anthropology, which has become conspicuously introverted, in the sense that it is intended to communicate with members of the same community rather than to share meaning and insight with outsiders. Hence, the text is scattered with the type of impenetrable and even vacuous jargon that seeks to make even the most banal observations seem to reflect some profound insight. Everything is ‘contested’, ‘negotiated’, ‘mediated’, ‘appropriated’ or ‘constructed’, ‘produced’ in ‘multiple materialities’ and ‘temporalities’, or ‘spatialized’ through processes of ‘territorialization’, if not ‘narrativized’, ‘collectivized’ or ‘corporealized’ (and so on). One may well wonder how all this measures up to the author’s aspiration to make Tokoist history accessible to the church’s members (p. 30). Moreover, there is a serious problem with the English in which the book is written, which adds to a further lack of clarity and at times even outright confusion because of the wrong use of words (‘notorious’ instead of ‘well-known’, ‘libertarian’ when the author means related to liberty, etc.). Clearly, there has been no language editor involved, for which not only the author but also the publisher should be blamed, who is – or otherwise should be – aware that the author is not a native English speaker.

The structure of the book is itself neat and clear. After a lengthy introductory chapter focusing on the author’s theoretical approaches to the subject, the book is divided into two main parts. The first one, entitled ‘Itineraries’, reconstructs the life of the prophet in two phases, from the moment of his birth in 1918 till his departure from Leopoldville in 1950, and from 1950 till his death in Luanda in 1984, thus covering in two chapters the Congolese and Angolan trajectories in his life and – rather importantly – including his periods of exile. These chapters illuminate a well-known theme in African religious history, that of the inter-connectedness of the realms of the spiritual and the political. Unfortunately, this is not in any way elaborated upon in an analytical discussion of spiritual power versus political power, in spite of its obvious relevance.

The second part, ‘Heritages’, explores in three chapters the ways in which the prophet’s disputed legacy has been transmitted in time and space, including in overseas Tokoist diasporas (a process dubbed ‘heritagization’ by the author). It brings us closer to the theme of collective memory – a memory of suffering – that is one of the main themes of the book. This is where the author’s main empirical research is presented, as we learn about the thoughts and actions of Tokoist congregations and the various ways believers connect these to the memory of their prophet. This process takes place both through writing – by reference to the prophet’s letters and recorded exhortations – as well as through recall. Together, these sources constitute a repertoire of ‘historicized “embodied knowledge”’ (p. 115) that, the author tells us, has been crucial in enabling the Tokoist movement to survive and to transcend its geographical boundaries.