Emmanuel Akyeampong that draw the reader’s gaze from colonial policy to local social organization and thus break the predominance of state politics in defining the historical chronology. Throughout, one longs for the sort of startling cultural insight brought by Luise White in her work on Nairobi. Such material would have enhanced the volume’s ability to demonstrate the continuities of urban life across political ruptures.

Amidst a series of chapters on music in Dar es Salaam, Stephen Hill comes closest to a credible connection between social and political history, noting the prominence of President Julius Nyerere’s conscious effort to build a national culture. ‘Informants consistently pointed to Nyerere and his policies as key for both the relative [sic] peaceful relations between Tanzania’s various ethnic groups and for keeping local music and dance on the national radar’ (p. 240). These chapters on music form the volume’s most cohesive thesis, building on the significance of dance societies noted by Terence Ranger and taarab bands studied by Kelly Askew. The chapters chart the fertile course of popular music in Dar es Salaam to its current influence as the home of Bongo Flava. What is most striking in this section is how inadequate the printed word is for the fertile ferment of urban culture. The music itself certainly tells a richer story than the printed lyrics gasping for air on the page. Again it is a shortcoming of the form, and, as with the whole volume, these chapters highlight the power of social history to map continuities and syntheses into a punctuated epoch.

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This powerful study of the Friday apostolics of the Masowe Church in Zimbabwe takes work on African Christianity in new directions. It does so primarily through its focus on the semiotics of sound, language, and song as part of the presence of God. For me, it is the demonstration of the materiality of language that most marks this book’s originality and boldness. Engelke worries about language – the Shona language. He takes language as a gateway to approaching the Friday apostolics’ understanding of God’s presence, and its uncertainty. There is nothing slick or easy about the way Engelke glosses the key concepts of the Church. He battles with them, rather as the members of the Church themselves do, as they struggle to understand what they believe and how they should live their faith. The word mutemo is the key term around which the Church builds and lives out its faith. Engelke interprets it as ‘a certain kind of religious “knowledge” ’ (p. 139), both a set of laws and a system of knowledge. Central to religious subjectivity, mutemo still remains an incomplete process of learning and becoming.

Part of the importance of Engelke’s approach is that he doesn’t try to slot the concept of mutemo into a neatly translated English box. It keeps a certain untidiness, which we, the readers, have to grapple with, as do the Friday apostolics themselves. Similarly we learn of the key intermediaries who mediate the ritual speech of the prophets: the vamiriri wemweya (pl. interpreters of the spirit). Through them, the speeches become part of the way the divine is realized for the congregation. The process of mediation which the mumiriri wemweya (sing.) provides is similar to
that described by Kwesi Yankah in his 1995 book Speaking for the Chief where he analyses the role of the okyeame, an Akan chief’s orator. He demonstrates the power and the circuit of formal talk among the Akan, where the okyeame mediates the communication of the royal word. Engelke insists on the primacy of language – its material quality – for the Friday apostolics, as they continually seek to understand the text(less) True Bible, which for them lies beyond the Scriptural text of the Bible. The focus on sound, speaking, voice, and noise as part of what Engelke calls the church’s ‘live and direct semiotics’ (p. 190) takes us on a new path of lived theology. It links up with a web of African poetics and spoken and sung practice where songs, beliefs, and ideas spread and have durability and permanence outside print. Engelke writes about how the Masowe hymns travel, without print, to distant parts of the church network, and about how a certain hymn holds the history of the church’s beginning. More than this, though, for the Friday apostolics voice is ‘the material of the divine’ (p. 201); voice in song is, for the apostolics, God’s presence. The book shows us just how this is so with a wonderful, gentle relentlessness and superb ethnography.

Alongside this radical emphasis on the metaphysics of the sonic we have finely drawn portraits of the lives of ordinary church members – men and women, elders and prophets – as they struggle with uncertainty and an understanding of God’s presence. One such figure is the prophet Nzira from the Juranafiri Santa congregation on the outskirts of Chitungwiza (30 kilometres south of Harare). At times, Nzira ‘becomes’ the angel Pagane as he preaches, and at others the angels Peter and Moses. Such narratives of sermons and the congregation’s varying responses to them, both sceptical and receptive, give the book multiple moments of drama as members and elders enact and wrestle with mutemo.

Engelke also sets the Friday Masowe Church within circles of history: theological, colonial, and post-colonial. Early in the text he reminds us that uncertainty about religious subjects is at the centre of a strand of Christian theology reaching back to St Augustine and the Confessions. Power, translation, and agency are three key themes in early chapters. The little-known Church Missionary Society activist Henry Venn – with his belief in the agency of African converts as well as the power of the written word – sits alongside the later figure of the missionary and Biblical translator Robert Moffat, who was also deeply committed to the efficacy of written Scripture. Engelke points to the legacy of misunderstanding arising from Moffat’s translation of ‘demons’ in the New Testament to badimo, the Tswana word for ancestors/gods. A Problem of Presence is on many levels a response to that early if well-meaning mistranslation.

Like the recent fine studies on the Masowe Church by Bella Mukonyora and on the ZAOGA church by David Maxwell, this book is a challenge to other scholars in the field. After a sticky and fascinating section on healing and honey, Engelke concludes with an account of the messiness of religion in contemporary politics. The prophet Nzira is jailed for rape; the Church’s brief and uncomfortable involvement in ZANU PF politics is outlined; a new woman prophet called Magdalene takes Nzira’s place. The process of searching for God’s presence continues.

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