Spiritual Warfare 101: Preparing the Student for Christian Battle

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Abstract
Taking its subtitle from a theological college course description, this paper examines the intersections of theological and anthropological ideas of culture, as seen through the eyes of Kenyan evangelists and American missionaries. One of the key concepts developed in the course, and in the broader program of this U.S.-funded nondenominational church in East Africa, is that understanding culture is key to learning and unlocking the spiritual ‘personalities’ (both godly and satanic) involved in spiritual warfare. Both Kenyans and Americans conceive of warfare as the struggle between secular and Christian worldviews and consider education to be one of the strongest weapons needed to win the battle. However, where U.S. teachers focus on animism and world-religious conflict as evidence of lingering immorality and ungodliness, Kenyans focus on American ethnocentrism and xenophobia as evidence of ongoing cultural misunderstandings and injustice. Analysis is based on examination of mission records and on field research conducted in Nairobi and western Kenya.

Keywords
religion, education, secularism, Christian missions, Kenya, American evangelism

Introduction to a Bible College in Nairobi
When religion and secularism are brought into conversation, they are usually presented as separate categories, associated with different domains (private and public, church/mosque/temple and school, tradition and modernity). This is the case in much of popular thought as well as in the foundational schemes of anthropology. Yet historically, in any number of settings, religion and secularism are co-ideations. They have meaning in relation to one another and, as concepts, are simultaneously produced. In the following pages, I would like to sketch the relation of religion and secularism in the history and current enterprise of a cluster of nondenominational Christian churches in Kenya. Collectively, these churches call themselves the original Christian church.
They renounce administrative hierarchies, including bishoprics and dioceses such as are found in Catholic and mainline Protestant churches; and they disdain the freewheeling manner of revelation that they associate with faith healers and Pentecostalism. Americans and East Africans alike in these churches—for they are largely funded and missionized through American congregations and staffed by East African evangelists—take a rational approach to divinity and salvation. Believers share a sense that systematic Bible study will reveal and unlock deeper meanings or, as American missiologists in these churches call them, ‘cultural equivalences’ through which missionaries can communicate the Bible to non-Christians.

One institution working in the name of these churches is a Bible college in Nairobi. Its degree-granting program includes a course titled Spiritual Warfare: Preparing the Student for Christian Battle. In this course the subject of anthropology is introduced and used as a ‘secular tool’ that can itself be used to combat secularism. The syllabus includes a reading list on which is included Symons Onyango’s *Set Free from Demons: A Testimony to the Power of God to Deliver the Demon Possessed* and Ensign and How’s *Counseling and Demonization: The Missing Link*. The course contrasts what it calls ‘western naturalistic’ from ‘African animistic’ worldviews and identifies ‘good and evil personalities’—the latter of which are said to be dispelled using ‘weapons, strategies and disciplines’ described in the book of Ephesians.

Anthropology emerges as a sort of field technique for learning to think cross-culturally, as well as for providing a written record of African customary life and history. Anthropology is taught to some students through the classic works of Clifford Geertz and Max Weber. E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s work is known by instructors, some of whom hold degrees in history and cross-cultural ministry. Charles Piot’s 1999 ethnography *Remotely Global* is read and interpreted to reflect that secularism is pervasive in rural Africa. Students in the college are mainly Kenyan; most instructors are American.

In the lobby of Nairobi Bible College (NBC) hangs a map, with pinpoints locating sites of students’ fieldwork. Western Kenya—an area known variously as Luoland, Nyanza and Kavirondo, depending on who is talking and when—is full of pinpricks. Kenyan students enrolled in Spiritual Warfare spend one week visiting rural villages in western Kenya. This practicum, according to the syllabus, is designed to help students learn how to use the ‘weapons of the spiritual war and strategies for overcoming the evil one’.

To understand better how American missionaries and Kenyan evangelists differently conceptualize spiritual warfare and its weapons, I focus in this essay on the history and content of nondenominational churches’ work at Nairobi Bible College and in western Kenya. One point that will emerge is that both
American missionaries and East African believers in these theologically conservative churches come across sounding like the ultimate secular modernists. From one angle they appear to favor the separation of religion and state and to support a tolerance of diverse views. That is, they appear to favor a classical model of ‘private belief’ distinct from ‘public neutrality’. Yet this is not entirely the case. American missionaries and East Africans alike differentiate the work of government from that of the Christian church; but the work of the church, they hold, is everywhere, including in the institutions of government. Churchgoers are not against providing social services per se. What they contest is what they call the ‘purchase of souls’ with gifts that they feel bait people to the church. They reject a transnational market that trades education for religious conversion, including international Protestant and Catholic NGOs that they consider function as ‘church-states’.

Seen from Kenyan evangelists’ views, however, American missionaries’ vision of education is not as clear as missionaries claim. While missionaries spurn the buying of souls, they fail to recognize that their ideas of culture are in some regards blind to Africans’ needs. In particular Kenyan evangelists contend that American missionaries should be more understanding of Luo practices of polygyny and their sense of time—two cultural concepts about which Americans teach but which East Africans suggest they do not understand. Americans and East Africans struggle—mutedly yet plainly—over who is the better able to lead the church. Americans imply Africans are never educated enough, ‘not even’ those with degrees from Europe or the United States. While on the one hand they speak about turning over the church to African leadership, on the other they refer to the church in Kenya as developmentally stuck in the ‘stage of adolescence’. Kenyan leaders find these infantilizing images disdainful and condescending. ‘We’ve got different ideas’, reported a church leader from western Kenya. Where Americans see Kenyans’ tendencies to distribute and lend money from church coffers to needy members as a form of mismanagement, even nepotism, Kenyans are inclined to see these gestures as expressions of Christian care and as a matter of ministering to the poor. And where missionaries regard Luo polygyny as sinful and backward, Luo see Americans’ rejection as dispassionate.

My objective in describing how Americans and Kenyans in these churches differently conceptualize education as weaponry against secularism is to analyze the multidimensionality of the religious-secularist nexus in this part of the world. Where most observers analyze secularization in relation to religious belief, I find it productive here to conceptualize a connection through the concept of education. Thinking about religion and education as co- inscribed requires understanding how people connect specific locations with distant
lands. One of the powers people attribute to both religion and education is their capacity as fields to transcend space and time. Yet as we have already seen from churchgoers’ different views, this is not entirely the case.

To describe the multidimensionality of religion and secularism through the lens of education, I offer first a short history of nondenominational churches in this part of East Africa. I then illustrate how these Kenyan churchgoers conceive of global expansion through religious schools and how Americans and Kenyans alike within these churches differently view the effects of education. My argument throughout is that both Kenyans and Americans conceive of warfare as a struggle between secular and Christian worldviews and consider education to be one of the strongest weapons needed to win the battle. However, where American missionaries focus on animism and ethnic violence as evidence of lingering immorality and ungodliness among Africans, Kenyans focus on American ethnocentrism and xenophobia as evidence of ongoing cultural misunderstandings and race-based injustices. Americans’ belief in animist legacies in Africa and Kenyans’ attention to rationality reverses classical-modernist images of Africa as a site of the West’s cultural contrast. This turned-around image has implications for rethinking secularization as the absence of religious belief in public life, as I discuss in the final section.

History of the Nondenominational Churches in East Africa

To get into the matter, consider first a history of the convergence of religious movements that bring these East African evangelists and American missionaries together. In broad brushstrokes, a Luo-led revival began in areas east of Lake Victoria in the late 1930s as a protest to British missionaries’ control of the Anglican Church. (The Church of England sent Anglican clergy to East Africa via the Church Missionary Society, which as early as 1844 had begun work on the Kenyan coast.) Luo leaders distinguished their church from Jolango, a Luo spirit-possession complex that itself was similar to that of Cwezi-kubandwa in Uganda (Bamunoba and Welbourn 1965; Beattie 1957). Likewise, they differentiated their work from the ‘European ways’ of British missionaries. So successful was this early movement that thousands of Luo joined the revival. Yet when the leader, Ishmael Noo, was accused of misconduct (Welbourn and Ogot 1966: 30), a second revival of more moderate and deliberately disciplined turn unfolded.

In the 1950s a group calling themselves Wahamaji—‘people who leave a place’—split from the Anglican Church and from Noo’s group. These African-led churches of Christ (as Welbourn and Ogot call them) withdrew from those they deemed ‘nominal’ Christians, including baptized Africans and Europe-
Wahamaji ‘recognized only Christ as the leader’ (Welbourn and Ogot 1966: 34) and eschewed ecclesiasticism and church hierarchy. Like Kenyan members of the nondenominational churches about which I write, Wahamaji practiced adult immersion baptism and sometimes called themselves ‘born again’. For the next twenty years Wahamaji churches were independently organized and led by Africans in western Kenya.

In the 1970s American missionaries from U.S. nondenominational churches arrived in Nyanza Province. They too called themselves the original Christian church, though in their case the name referred to churches derived from a 1830s revival meeting in Lexington, Kentucky (Hughes 1996). They too believed in church-state separation and that church work should focus on preaching, not politics and governance—for such work was trivial and unimportant. These U.S. nondenominational churches, like African churches of Christ in Nyanza, ‘sought to be the spiritual aspect of a community whose secular affairs [should] be left safely in the hands of the state’ (Welbourn and Ogot 1966: 7). While there is some indication these American missionaries’ theological views preceded them through churches associated with the Africa Inland Mission, the first American nondenominational mission church established as a ‘true Christian church’ was ‘planted and watered’ in 1974 (Kenya Mission Team 1980).

Between the 1970s and 1990s nondenominational missionaries from these American churches focused on ‘the planting of New Testament churches in Kenya’ (ibid., 2), and they worked to develop Bible correspondence courses that linked rural Africans with American Christian pen pals. In the 1990s, in part in response to the Kenyan government’s requirement that religious organizations obtain licenses and declare their usefulness (Hearn 2002), church work in Kenya shifted from ministering to the rural poor to developing technical skills among the urban middle class. ‘This allowed us to work from positions of strength and build the church from a solid base’, reported one American outreach director at NBC in 2003. Middle-class Kenyans, he argued, would in turn minister to less fortunate brethren. It was about this time, in the 1990s, that NBC registered itself as a nongovernmental organization and began to expand its course offerings in areas of information technology, group counseling, and business administration—in addition to continuing to offer courses on cross-cultural ministry and evangelism. By the late twentieth century these churches estimated more than eight hundred congregations with twenty thousand adult members across western, central and eastern Kenya.

By 2002–2003, when I began studying these churches and their regional networks across Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda (see Stambach 2009), a new revival of a sort was emerging. For the first time ever nondenominational
churches were beginning to build and staff community schools. Churches managed more than a dozen primary schools, a secondary school, a polytechnic (vocational training) school, Nairobi Bible College and extension programs across East Africa. Projects included veterinary work, literacy campaigns, family relief and trauma counseling. The church’s management of nonchurch projects is remarkable as an indication of these churches’ turn toward participating in what historically their members had seen as the domain of government—and remarkable also for widening the definition of ‘private schools’ in eastern Africa to include not only mainline Christian schools but also Christian academies that seek to train ‘God-fearing citizens’ to evangelize the world.

Although involved for several years in providing technical training and English-language skills to adults, including those enrolled in the Bible college, nondenominational churches heretofore had shied away from involvement in basic education. But because of the Kenyan government’s requirement that the church register as an NGO, and in response to international policy calls for faith groups to dialogue and partner with government (Belshaw, Calderisi and Sugden 2001; Marshall 2001), by the early twenty-first century these missionaries and evangelists were at the forefront of community development.

One of the schools that American missionaries ‘planted’—Rongo Christian Academy—is located in Nyanza Province. Although American-funded, it is less American-indebted than funders might imagine; and although evangelical and millennial in terms of outlook on the future, it is more ‘rational’ and enterprising than its ‘God-fearing’ language might connote.

**Rongo Christian Academy**

The Rongo Academy primary school is indicated by one of the pinpoints on the Bible college map in Nairobi. But in reality Rongo Academy is located in western Kenya, about twenty-five kilometers east of Lake Victoria. In May 2003 the land was lush and green, the rainy season had just begun, and a few tethered sheep were grazing on new grass. Rongo Church is fenced off from the dirt road and is framed by two pillars of brick and mortar. The building stands at the edge of Zecharia Ndisi’s *dala* (compound), which includes his house and those of two grown sons. All of Mr. Ndisi’s five children are now living elsewhere in the country. Two daughters are married and have moved to nearby villages. His two sons reside in Nairobi but maintain houses on their father’s land and return for holidays. Mr. Ndisi is *mzee* (elder) of the church and one of its founding members. Some Luo neighbors say he invited Ameri-
can missionaries to Rongo in order to bring new money into the community. Others say that he himself had been a ‘stuttering man’ whom missionaries had rescued from the irrational tongues of Pentecostalism. But by all accounts Rongo church flourished and ‘grew to the sky like the weeds’ in the late 1970s and then fell from about 150 to fewer than 10 adult baptized members ten years later.

Asked, why the church declined, Mzee Ndisi responded with two reasons. First, another church, the Pentecostal Church, came to Nyanza. Pentecostal missionaries from Meru promised to take boys and girls to schools and to pay evangelists full salaries. Eighty percent of Rongo villagers moved to that denomination. Most of those who went were poor and unemployed, including many women. Converts sought not only material prosperity but spiritual rescue and affirmation. Pentecostals’ demonstrative worship and ecstatic message of deliverance appealed, Mzee and his neighbors said, to many people in the area who saw nondenominational churches’ rules as emotionally stymieing and culturally repressive. Pentecostals, in contrast to these nondenominational American missionaries, positively valued African traditions, including dancing and drumming, which are forbidden within the nondenominational churches. Moreover, women from around the Rongo community found new opportunities with Pentecostal churches. Pentecostals allowed women to preach and participate equally with men. In nondenominational churches, by contrast, women could only teach and preach to children. Related was a second reason for nondenominational’s earlier failure: Luo in Rongo had particular expectations about what it meant to be a church member. ‘People equated American missionaries with education, health and spiritual guidance’, Mzee said, but nondenominational missionaries did not offer material things. Missionaries told Luo elders that their sponsoring churches in the United States had sent them to preach ‘the Gospel of the Church, not the Gospel of the Building’ (as Mzee’s sons translated Mzee’s words from Luo into English), and that if Americans built schools and clinics, people would come for handouts and subsidies, not because the Holy Spirit had called them to ‘see Jesus’. Naturally, Mzee said, Luo people stayed away.

But all of this changed in 1999, when Rongo church elders themselves started a school, Rongo Christian Academy. At first classes were held in the back of the church and only a handful of students attended, but by the second year the community had raised enough money to build a separate structure, and now nearly two hundred students were enrolled in prekindergarten through grade 4. Preschool classes were held in the church; all other classes were located in a nearby cement structure with one classroom for each cohort. In contrast to the nearby public primary school, which had a per-classroom
student-to-teacher ratio of more than fifty-to-one, Rongo Academy claimed half that ratio, with about twenty-five students for every teacher. The student-to-textbook ratio at Rongo Academy was likewise in students’ favor compared with that of the public primary school, and the building and facilities were newer at the academy.

A less attractive feature of the academy, though typical of the differences between private schools throughout East Africa, was the fact that teachers employed at Rongo Academy were less credentialed and less experienced than public school teachers—and less well paid. Yet what Rongo teachers lacked in training, they said they more than made up for in moral standing. Their ‘abilities to lead as Christians’ were skills they said they could openly use at Rongo Christian Academy. Teachers’ religious modes of instruction paid off, according to Mzee, in Rongo students’ fine behavior. Not only were Rongo students more orderly and well disciplined, as evidenced by the polite manner in which they greeted visitors, but the school reported fewer suspensions and absences than the public school—facts that Mzee and teachers attributed to Rongo’s grounding in Christianity.

Regarding programming, both the academy and the public school followed the national curriculum; and students at both institutions took national examinations in their seventh year to determine qualifications for matriculation. To matriculate to public schools, however, students needed higher passing scores than for private schools. Fees, not test scores, were the primary determinant of admission to private schools. To counterbalance the stereotype that only wealthy students attended private institutions, the all-Luo school board at Rongo offered scholarships to students from poorer families. Many of these scholarships came from funds raised from American congregations.

Asked what the missionaries did to contribute to the school, Mzee Ndisi reported ‘Onge’ (nothing). Luo, he said, had raised up this church on their own and had recruited the missionaries into their project. Mzee’s own son, for instance, had gone to the United States to raise money directly from churches there—plus some Luo friends working in Nairobi had made generous contributions, he said. Where the missionaries reported church development the other way around—as a matter of Americans engaging Luo elders in Americans’ church projects—Mzee Ndisi made it clear that the church was established, developed and run by Luo. He and his sons and other church leaders saw it as a ‘calling’ to establish the church and school.

In administering and managing the work of the church, Mzee conceived that he and other Luo in the community now ‘owned’ the church and school. Asked what the purpose of the education is, Mzee continued by asserting that the point was to ‘evangelize the community’. In an extension of evangelical
reasoning, he pronounced that the work of the Luo church and school was ‘to train and send missionaries overseas’. In particular elders with this Luo church anticipated the day they would ‘evangelize the U.S.A.’. The point of the school, in addition to educating children, was to educate Luo graduates who would lead the development of the local village and the growth of the Christian church internationally. The United States in particular was in need of evangelization, Luo with this church and academy declared, in that currently American missionaries were ‘uneducated’ in understanding that Luo tradition was not backward or evil but part of ‘God’s world’ and Luo history. The point around which tensions pivoted was the object of warfare: superstition or ignorance?

Mzee Zechariah Ndisi anticipated it would take some time before Luo could educate Americans and evangelize the United States; but he was clear that he put the seeds of hope for Luo evangelization in Rongo Christian Academy. Already members of his church were working to educate American missionaries who visited regularly; and Mzee Ndisi’s congregation had begun to establish new congregations in other villages. In the 1980s leaders planted new congregations in nearby Kanyamkago village, and in 1999 up to the ethnographic present, they sent evangelists to teach English in Tanzania. Although no ‘fieldwork’ map hangs in Rongo Academy, as seems to be typical at nondenominational mission centers, Rongo church was supporting something of its own evangelical diaspora. Students from Rongo had visited U.S. churches, and one of Mzee’s own sons was a Bible college student in Louisiana. Today the church and school sit at the crossroads of small snack shops and kiosks that have developed nearby. Membership has grown to more than three hundred, and the church supports a salaried Luo pastor and a part-time youth minister—both of whom hold certificates from Nairobi Bible College.

**Evangelizing the United States and Using Anthropology to Christianize Africa**

With this picture in mind—of Luo elders’ views that schooling is the work of the church (not government) and that the work of the church is the work of elders (not of American missionaries)—I’d like to consider first how Luo in Rongo present Christianity in terms of ownership and belonging and, in the course of the discussion, comment on Geschiere and Nyamnjoh’s observation (2000) that political-economic liberalization leads to the intensification of debates about who belongs where. Second, I will comment on how Luo leaders’ sense of open horizons—of the expansion of the church internationally
and, in particular, of the evangelization of the United States by Luo—circumscribes Americans as ‘culturally different’ within a universalizing discourse of Christianity that is refracted now through a Luo frame. Third, I will examine how American and Luo nondenominational Christians share and pivot on a common theme— for it is this commonality, I believe, that makes their differences appear similar.

Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2000) note a fascinating byproduct of political-economic liberalization at the turn of the twenty-first century: a growth in the intensity of the debate about who is autochthonous versus who is foreign. Their argument is that the political and economic loosening of governmental control over industry and the provisioning of social services results paradoxically not in greater global exchange but in greater localization. Markets in theory know no bounds; they are open to everyone. But under conditions of competitiveness and privatization, social goods (including, Geschiere and Nyamnjoh observe, land, businesses, commodities and, I would add, schools) are controlled in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and in terms of who owns and benefits from what.

The ‘us-them’ dimension of localization is typically cast in terms of ethnicity. No less in the wake of the December 2007 Kenyan presidential elections (Africa News 2008a) than in elections held soon after Kenyan independence in 1962, Luo, Kalenjin and Kikuyu in rural regions near Rongo clashed over who had rights to land and, through land, to leadership. Rights to land through leadership pivot on a concept of spiritual heritage that is foreign to American missionaries’ sense of distinction between the sacred and the secular. The land-leadership connection in western Kenya is enmeshed with residence and land use, including with conventions of ownership that grant rights to descendants living on ancestral lands. In fact, this was the reason that Mzee Ndisi’s sons built houses on their father’s land: to mark their continued claim through patrilineal descent to land in Rongo even though they lived nearly full-time in Nairobi. However, compared with political elections and ethnic strife, the clash of claims to ownership and land is less overt between Luo and American nondenominational Christians than among Luo and other Kenyan groups. To most people living in and around Rongo, the land on which the nondenominational church and school rest belongs legally and culturally to Luo—and specifically to Mzee Ndisi, for he had parceled up hectares of land that would have otherwise gone directly to his sons.

To follow Geschiere and Nyamnjoh’s point one step further: the maximization of resources and organizational efficiency under conditions of market liberalization triggers a general obsession—an obsession with rivalry, ownership and the continual expansion of territory. As Geschiere and Nyamnjoh
put it, the flow and enclosure of wealth and capital ‘promotes an ever greater mobility of people’ on the one hand and, on the other, ‘a tendency toward protectionism’ (424). Luo leaders’ sense of protectionism—of claiming the church and school as their work—is directly related, I contend, to their claims for control over the assets of the church as a measure of their belonging in the region and of their social and political standing, nationally and globally. Where American missionaries regard claims to ownership in terms of capacities to manage and finance religious enterprise (including church schools), Luo see ownership in terms of a capacity to claim ownership by virtue of spiritually informed patrilineal immanence. That is, they base their case of ownership on principles of birthright and inheritance. (In this regard U.S. president Barack Obama’s Luo heritage and Christian self-identification help to instantiate a particular Luo view of territorial world connection through descent and Christianity. The election of a Luo-born African American to the office of the U.S. presidency brings into question for Luo in these churches American missionaries’ distinction between Luo and American ownership and between the sacred realm and secular government. Stories reported in Kenya’s popular media—for example, an *Africa News* article [2008b] titled ‘An Obama Presidency Brings Hope for Development’—suggest as much.)

To return to my point about ownership and belonging and put it more succinctly: Luo ideas of open horizons and hopes for the evangelization of the United States are refracted through a Luo frame of social reproduction through alliance and patrilineality. Rongo Academy marks the ongoing claims of Luo locally, in this part of western Kenya. As a contemporary institution the private school represents a novel way to reproduce generationality in an era of liberalization: through the formal education of children and the geographic expansion of Luo ideas through schooling and evangelization.

Moreover, in view that Luo political organization represents ‘a classic case of… a segmentary lineage society in which kin groups divide and subdivide like branches of a tree;… [and] patriliney, bridewealth, and polygyny all reinforce each other’ (Shipton 1989, 19), it is not far-fetched, I contend, to suggest that contemporary church and schooling are also organized and charted through this frame. The church and school effect reproduction and social growth in this part of South Nyanza, and reproduction is locally understood in terms of patrilineality and agnatic corporation. To rephrase this, in Luo ideations belonging and ownership exist in, and extend into, all parts of the created world. And yet I am mindful of D. W. Cohen and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo’s caution against seeing patrifocality as the sine qua non of Luo life. Cohen and Odhiambo write of Luo living in western Kenya that ‘one finds little indication of corporate action of agnic groups, little evidence that
segmentation [is] a prime process of group formation, or that patrilineality [defines] the modes of recruitment’ to existing families (1989: 13). Instead they consider that ‘alliances of unrelated individuals and alliances marked by affinal [i.e., marital] connections’ mark Luo forms of social incorporation and reproduction (13).

Both Shipton’s and Cohen and Odhiambo’s points apply to what I discuss. Land and lineage are undeniably central to Mzee’s and his sons’ authority. So too are the alliances these Luo leaders sustain with exogenous American missionaries and with unrelated parents of Luo schoolchildren. Together, corporate agnatic social action and the incorporation of ‘others’ chart the possibilities of expansion through education and evangelization. Moreover, this particular frame of social expansion—through social alliance and patrilineality—does not fully exclude women leaders, despite what some American missionaries considered to be the chauvinist Luo practices of bequeathing land and property through men. In fact, some Luo evangelists regard American missionaries themselves as sexist for excluding women from preaching and leading the church—for it is the condition of membership that congregations uphold the tradition that, in these churches, only men are permitted to preach. Nonetheless Luo elders in western Kenya and Luo evangelists working at Nairobi Bible College conceptualize American missionaries’ own expansionist work—that of ‘claiming Africa for Christ’, as Americans put it—in terms of Americans’ own reproduction and their exclusion of Africans from ownership. The Luo picture of American schooling is one of Americans reproducing ethnocentric models of Africans as backward. In particular Luo evangelists criticize mission anthropology for being un-anthropological. Instead of understanding and conveying what is ‘African’ about Luo culture, Luo evangelists say, these American missionaries reproduce old Americanist models of African time and culture—and that this transmission of ideas to new generations is a way that American missionaries maintain hegemonic control of the church and its projects. One Luo church leader reported that

when an American church sends money to this missionary, part of that money goes to the Kenyan, and that Kenyan is in the missionary’s hands. And when a missionary comes to Kenya, that missionary becomes an employer. He might employ a housemaid, a garden worker, a watchman for security. He employs all these Kenyan people, some of whom are themselves local evangelists. Maybe the gardener is an evangelist or a preacher or another congregation member. If, or when, the evangelist and missionary disagree—if, for instance, they don’t agree on matters of church doctrine or lifestyle—that evangelist can’t confront the missionary. He must keep quiet if he wants to keep his job. He feels intimidated. And finally the problem does not necessarily stop there. It extends to Kenyans’ families and friends, especially if they depend on cash from the Kenyan who is employed by missionaries.
E0-E3 Evangelism

Notwithstanding these tensions, commonalities obtain. A common theme of congregations across national memberships—a point of contact, as church leaders think of it—is that ‘satanic’ forces afflict the world. The job of the church, as it were, is to keep these bedeviling agents under wraps. Spiritual Warfare 101 taught by American missionaries at the Nairobi Bible College conveys that the ‘realities of Christian battle’ occur in the hearts and minds of ordinary people and in ‘pre-Christian superstitions’. Evil manifests itself as ‘the demons of your relatives who died prematurely and are avenging their deaths’ (Onyango 2001: 22) and as ‘our sexual drive and need for food’ (Moreau 1997: 67). Such characterizations make perfect sense from American and Luo churchgoers’ perspectives. *Cien* and *chira*—‘ghostly vengeance’ and ‘personal affliction’—have long been described of, and by, people in Nyanza (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1950; Ndisi 1974: 88; Shipton 1989: 25, 52). But differences emerge when the subject turns to culture and its relation to the Bible.

One way of ‘locking up’ these unseen, disturbing forces is to study and use anthropology, according to the course on Spiritual Warfare: ‘Culture shapes who we are’, reads one syllabus. ‘It is pervasive and often unexamined. Coming to an understanding of culture is vital for effective missions. First, we need to understand our own culture and worldview. Second, we need to understand our target culture and how we can best communicate the eternal gospel to people different than ourselves’. Lessons on ‘the character of culture’ and ‘cultural validity’ in the syllabus precede a lesson on ‘cultural distance’, itself divided into nine lessons, each of which explains how to measure ‘cultural distance between the teacher and those taught’. Cultural distance is codified, in this syllabus, in an E0-to-E3 conception, whereby E0 evangelism refers to an absence of communication between evangelists and those ‘who simply follow the religion of their parents’. E1 refers to complete cultural correspondence between evangelist and ‘his target community’; E2, to a less than perfect relationship and E3 to a nearly complete cultural difference, an example of which is given to be ‘an African evangelist going to China’. These categories unfold in a continuum from greater (E1) to lesser (E3) cultural correspondence, and E0 stands outside, as a separate category. E0 accounts for cases such as those involving believers who experience alienation from natal communities upon converting to Christianity.

This highly rationalized scheme, I suggest, fights spiritual warfare with secular rationalism; anthropology—here in highly a modified form—becomes a tool for advancing Christianity. But where historicism underlies a history of anthropology, a kind of biblicism comes into view, by which I mean that the
Bible serves as a standard measure of cultural evolution. American missionaries stand toward the finished end; East Africans are in process. However, this is where Luo members jump ship from missionaries. Luo church members find the model of cultural progress that favors Americans offensive, not least because it portrays African culture as more distant than Western culture from the perfection these churchgoers consider to be prophesied in the Bible. African culture is portrayed as ‘pervaded by ancestors, gods, ghosts, and spirits’, and American culture is portrayed as ‘naturalistic’ and ‘linear’, the way science is described in school textbooks and curricula: as ruled by the ‘laws of nature, studied by experimentation, and understood by scientific analysis’. (No wonder that religious studies professor John Mbiti in the 1950s should have responded to Americans’ Theological Education Fund questionnaire, ‘I beg to inform you, some of the questions you ask are relevant only to the American educational set up’.)

In its introductory paragraph the NBC syllabus that was used into the early twenty-first century asks the very question that some Luo evangelists ask of American missionaries: ‘Since language and cultural distances exist, why not bypass missionaries and have nationals do all the work?’ India and the Western church are referenced in the answer to this question, as though India, in characteristic historicist form, were the intermediary of Africa and Western Europe: ‘Because abuse of the system in India has led to people building little empires which support family and friends’, and ‘the western church needs to continue sending both people and funds or the mission drive will die’. Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and other sociologists of the early twentieth century generally regarded India as more developed than Africa but less so than Western Europe. As evidence for this they pointed to the complexity of religious symbolism in India and to the caste system as an expression of a more advanced social order than African segmentary and acephalous political systems, though they regarded the socio-religious aspects of Indian life as less rationally organized than were such aspects in Western Europe. Since Durkheim and Weber’s time, the paradigms of social theory have shifted from using Europe as a standard toward understanding historical and political processes that place regions in positions of inequality. Nonetheless, social theory of the early twentieth century informed colonial era government, and colonists looked to India as a more advanced model for Africa. (The Raj in a sense was the master template for imperialism, though in the end it could not be followed.) In similar vein, and drawing on a similar logic of social evolution, American nondenominational missionaries figured India as test case for evangelism. If India fails, then certainly Africa will fall on practices of nepotism and corruption, the model went. One nondenominational missionary in Nyanza suggested
that ‘the Devil is at work in Luoland in bringing jealousies, divisions, in splintering, and all together preventing a united body of people’. This he offered as an explanation as to why the mission’s work was not yet done.

**Poverty, Not Superstition: The Object of Spiritual Warfare**

In response to such descriptions of Africa as only ‘partially developed’, a Luo Bible college administrator said in an interview, ‘Oh come on! When you hear American church leaders speak like that, it hurts. It does not create good relationships between us and our missionaries’. Noteworthy again is the fact that Luo claim American missionaries as theirs, not vice versa. Whereas American missionaries speak as though they are ‘missionizing East Africans’, Luo frame church work the other way: in terms of themselves owning the mission project. But the administrator’s point is not to endorse rule or governance over the missionaries but to clarify the purpose of evangelization. He agreed that satanic forces pervade the everyday. These forces were not necessarily ghostly vengeance or lineal splintering—although he did not entirely discount them, as these too are aspects of Luo life in Nairobi and Nyanza—but ignorance, fear and poverty. It was mistrust and inequality, he said, that fostered dependency and kept Kenyans underdeveloped. ‘Satan dominates some Christian people’, he stated openly to an audience at a church conference he attended in central Texas. ‘How can we work together to overcome this spiritual warfare? Why can’t we work together to train our members and leaders in the Bible?’ His vision of warfare was not in battling the malevolence of traditional culture, as was the missionaries’, but had to do with conquering the fact that many missionaries did not accept that they could learn from Africans. As this evangelist put it: ‘American missionaries think we are backwards in one way or another compared to Americans, educationally. There is cultural baggage that missionaries have; some come here when they are, I’m sorry to say, still young and they don’t have a lot of experience… Others come and stay as though they are trying to keep the profession going for their children’.

Like American missionaries, this leader envisioned education as a means for overcoming spiritual affliction. ‘Education and a close reading of the Old Testament in cultural and historical context’, he said, were the best way to ‘plant’ and ‘grow’ Christianity—particularly, the Old Testament, because he agreed this part of the Bible would speak to and attract Muslims to Christianity. But where American missionaries saw education as never being successful enough to justify leaving the church in Africans’ hands, this Luo leader, like Mzee Ndisi in Rongo, believed that it had already created success. As Luo see it, for
Americans Luo education was not successful because educated Luo were not westernized, at least not in the way or to the degree that missionaries understood westernization: as a rejection of animistic spiritual belief, polygyny and ‘cyclical’ time. In their dedication to cyclical time, missionaries believed, Africans did not progress forward through innovation on a day-to-day or generational basis.

Moreover, Americans framed African development in terms of child development and immaturity. As Americans saw it, Luo schooling was in the formative phase: educated Africans ‘still believed’ in chien and chira, and schooled Luo were sympathetic to polygyny. Americans’ depiction of childlike progress is evidenced in a handout in which new African churches are conceptualized as growing monogamous-nuclear families (Stambach 2009: chap. 4). ‘But many of our own fathers have second wives; my own mother is one of three’, protested one daughter-in-law of a church elder in Rongo. ‘Would missionaries want us to forsake our own families?’ This daughter-in-law and her husbands’ colleagues took the NBC motto, as stated on the college’s publications, at face value: ‘Africans claiming Africa for Christ’. A continent is claimed for Christ, and Africans in the course are Christian. She and others remarked that Luo and Americans hold different views of evangelism. Luo want to pass Christianity across cultures, Americans want pass it down.

Missionaries’ model of passing religious knowledge and education down reflects what in their framework would be considered an E3 model of evangelism: American and African cultures are disjunct, and the former is more advanced. This is the model American missionaries use, and it is the one Luo evangelists do not like. By contrast, evangelizing through education and passing Christianity on to people who have not yet, as it were, declared Christ as Lord but have a sense of common culture (as in Mzee Ndisi’s Rongo case) follows an E0 fashion by which cultural models are conjunct. E0 evangelism—perhaps exemplary of ‘Africans claiming Christ for Africa’ in a fashion undiluted, unrated, uncensored and unmediated by Americans—seems exactly what these American missionaries (at least in theory) want, and what Luo evangelists and educators do. By this model ‘Christ is the only leader’, and missionaries bear witness and serve. ‘Africans claiming Christ for Africa’, however, threatens Americas’ overseas role. Charges from American missionaries that Indians (for example) are ‘building up little empires among their friends and family’ as well as the excuse that ‘education is never enough’ become ways these Americans continue to legitimate their presence, their lifestyle, and their identity as foreign missionaries. Culture, in short, becomes a means for reproducing these missionaries’ conceptions of American exceptionality.

In arguing that Americans ‘keep the profession going for their children’, Luo leaders frame American predominance in terms of generational lineality;
in terms, that is, that are similar to Luo concepts of descent and patrilineage. But more than this, these Luo leaders see that the need to hedge is not particular to African culture, nor is ignorance and deception anywhere a part of ‘Satan's work’ independent from what people do. The question for these Luo leaders is whether Americans articulate and see this ambiguity or whether these missionaries always interpret ‘lies’ as Satan’s work. The Luo speaker to his audience in Texas suggested that people by nature are accumulative; Americans no less than, let us say, ‘imperialist Indians’ protect and conserve their resources. But dishonesty—or better, duplicity—is admitted in different ways. Thus in a sense this Luo speaker was more aware than his teachers that shared human tendencies have different, no better or worse, cultural and material manifestation. His tendency clearly was to call poverty ‘Satan’s work’ and to see labeling of Africans as ‘backward’ mistaken and ethnocentric.

Final Thoughts

What each of the various players and vignettes in this essay share—across the settings of various congregations, the Nairobi Bible College, and Rongo Christian Academy—is a commitment to education as a means of combating evil and delivering the spirit-possessed. Like the secular banishing of disease and ignorance, but with emphasis on divine, not human, intervention, churchgoers in all settings recognize knowledge as the power to liberate people from poverty. Their collective stories—American and Luo alike—illustrate that education and religion are many things. In these parts of Kenya people regard education as a prerequisite for claiming Africa for Christ. Both Luo and Americans in this church see schooling as necessary for knowing how to control and run the church. For Luo being educated means connecting local and global versions of cultural history. For American missionaries it means knowing how far or near individuals and groups are from the perfect culture described in and anticipated by the Bible. What both groups share is the idea that religious belief is inseparable from the public domain: religion and secularism are conjoined. Both conceive that a spiritual cosmology is publicly pervasive at all times. Americans see spiritual work as evident in the equivalences that pattern social life; Luo see it as indicated through moments of Americans’ unconditional generosity and through the positive economic outcomes of schooling, public policy and development work.

The fact that both groups regard religion as always publicly salient (if not pervasive) reminds me of the need to qualify an exchange between Talal Asad and José Casanova. In an essay titled ‘Secularism, Nation-State, Religion’, Asad (2003) elaborated the ‘deprivatization of religion’ argument, which holds
that religion has a role to play in contemporary public life. Associated with the work of sociologist José Casanova (1994), the deprivatization argument describes religion as connected historically to the formation of the secular-modern nation-state. Asad declared that Casanova’s argument is neither specifically right nor wrong. It is partly right, Asad said, in recognizing that some expressions of religious belief are historically tied to secular government (the history of establishment churches gives ample evidence of this). But it is wrong in failing to recognize that other forms of religious expression have no historical or cultural connection to the nation-state. Asad discerned that in Casanova’s argument, it is precisely, and only, those religions that espouse a faith in the power of rational debate and a belief in the liberalist ‘sifting and winnowing’ of ideas that move successfully into modern public life. Casanova’s argument, in Asad’s estimation, implied that ecumenical and moderate forms, not certain kinds of spiritisms and orthodoxies, went public. Casanova replied (2006) with the useful clarification that yes, his argument had been directed primarily to liberal secular theories of the public sphere, but that he had not argued that illiberal forms of religion were antithetical to modernity. Nor did he commend only those religions of the liberal form. In my estimation Casanova clarified his earlier argument, yet he illustrated his points once again with examples drawn from the post-Enlightenment (from Catholic political theology), which in effect narrowly exemplified his thesis.

Through the work of these nondenominational missionaries and East African believers, however, we can sharpen both Casanova’s and Asad’s points. We can see that spiritism and orthodoxies do inform modern public life. And we can recognize that in Kenya in the realm of education, principles of descent and inheritance and of territoriality and ownership inform Luo conceptions of modern schooling and other aspects of this church’s work. In other words, it is not only post-Enlightenment values but also values of kinship and descent and lineal conceptions of belonging and of territory that inform religiosity in public life. The ‘deprivatization of religion’ thesis—that religious belief is increasingly publicly salient—makes sense in this ethnographic setting, though not in a way accounted for in previous work. Luo and Americans in this church bring their faith into public life. Yet the multiplicity of voices—the presence of which, for Casanova (2006: 13-14), is the ‘litmus test for a modern public life’—is outside this church’s frame. Neither Luo nor Americans (the latter, at least, when they are working in East Africa) defend their work in terms of a right to be one of many who populate the public space. Instead they justify their public engagement as the need to protect good from evil and to battle for Jesus’ cause, as the one and only way to embody faith. In other words, and specifically, through these transnational Christians’ myriad views
and activities, we can see other forms of religiosity besides ecumenical-liberalist forms animating public life. Spiritist forms in the American missionaries’ rationalist worldview enliven their public work. Logical forms of human reasoning invigorate the Luo churchgoers’ spiritism.

Both Asad’s and Casanova’s positions—that secularism supports some religious views (and the other way around, that some religious views support some kinds of secularism)—imply that secularism should not be seen as the antithesis of religion. Rather, secularism should be viewed as the reorganization of religion with respect to other concepts, notions and institutions. The discreteness of religion and education—or of economics and law and so on—is called into question by this position, as are the terms of debate about education. For if education is a matter of learning to embody a certain kind of knowledge and social morality, then surely contests over religion and education are not about whether but how religion and education are connected. They are about how to engage, what to embody, what to define and, of course, what to teach as orthodox and given—and what, in some cases, to identify as the object of spiritual warfare.

References


**Notes**


2. Interviews conducted in Nairobi, May 2003. Unless noted otherwise, and for purposes of protecting participants’ privacy, proper names of interviewees are pseudonyms.
3. Interview conducted in Nairobi, May 2003.
5. Lynn (2003) reports 1965 as the starting point for these mission churches, an earlier date in that Lynn refers to temporary and short-term mission stations.
6. This is also the case in these particular nondenominational churches in the United States.
8. The questionnaire, an earlier historical example of missionaries’ use of culture to teach and preach the Bible, sought to identify commonalities in East Africans’ and Americans’ education but unwittingly took the latter as the standard for comparison. Collection 91 (Records of the Committee to Assist Ministry Education Overseas), Box 8, File 59, Archives of the Billy Graham Center, Wheaton, Illinois.
10. Interview conducted in Nairobi, May 2003.