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Introduction: Christian revival and survival in Africa

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Introduction: Christian Revival and Survival in Africa

By Michèle Sigg, Editor

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* explores the witness of African Christians in situations of revival and survival. African Christian history is replete with instances of these two extremes of Christian faith—when God visits his people in power as the church grows and when he bears his persecuted children in his arms as they breath their last.

The East African Revival swept through Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Sudan starting in the 1930s. The effects of the revival were powerful and longlasting in many churches, especially the Anglican Church, and the movement continues even today. One story of its origin comes from someone whose grandmother was alive at that time and became “born again” in the early years of the revival:

In the 1930s, there was a move of God and it started off in Rwanda, central Africa, but it spread to Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania. It became known as the East African revival. It started with (...) a man from Buganda, the kingdom of Buganda, as it was known then, which is more than 500 miles from the border with Rwanda. But he had a dream apparently. And he said in the dream, he heard God tell him, go south to a people who look after cattle and tell them about me because they don't know about me. (...) he packed and started walking south in what was then the Uganda protectorate and he walked as far as the border. (...)

So he went to sleep when he got to the near the border and he had a dream, another dream. And in the dream he said God told him, go further south. So he thought, okay, that's now crossing an international border. So a little before that time, the British Missionary Organization known as a Church Missionary Society, had started its very first mission station in Rwanda [Gahini]. And my grandfather was one of the people who became one of their administrators 'cause he could speak English, he could speak Swahili, which was useful in East Africa.

(...) [the man from Uganda] became a member of their staff and for a number of years, 'cause my grandmother remembers him, they called him “the funny little man from Uganda” because he would just go up to strangers and ask, “Can I pray for you? <laugh> Can I pray for you?” And he prayed with a lot of people, but nothing seemed to happen for years and years. He even went back and got a wife, got married, brought her back. Still nothing happened. But somewhere, after he got a wife, I believe he decided to do a prayer meeting, at the CMS station.

(...) Then one day, all of a sudden in the chapel there was like a commotion. And because the culture of Rwanda is very sort of reserved,

like loud expressions of falling out and yelling is really frowned upon. And so it never happened. But there was this commotion in the chapel and they thought, what on earth is going on? They stopped the prayer meeting, they went to go see what was going on because it was just so unusual. And when they walked in men and women in the chapel, some were crying and praying about their sin, which they were very aware of, separating them from God. And some were singing and dancing because they felt very aware of the blood of Jesus cleansing them from all sin. And they didn't stop, which would've been normal if when someone came in, they just kept going. It was just so strange, like nobody knew what was going on. (...)

And after they'd gone through that experience, they became very active evangelists. They'd go out in groups, men and women...¹

Daewon Moon, in his 2022 book *African Initiative and Inspiration in the East African Revival*² underlines the catalyzing role of Yosiya Kinuka—a worker at the Gahini Hospital—in the early spread of the revival:

Kinuka set an inspiring model for conversion that integrated internal and external transformation. Following his example, restoration of broken relationships and restitution of misappropriated items became the expected outcome of true repentance in the Gahini station. Some people encapsulated atypical conversion process in the Ruanda Mission as “the 3 Rs”: repentance, restoration, and restitution. Once repentance was made in a genuine manner, the revivalist converts emphasized, it should precipitate a visible change in one’s attitude and behavior.

A British doctor who had worked with Kinuka for several years at Gahini Hospital immediately recognized his changed behavior. This devout medical missionary named John E. Church (better known as “Joe Church”) was excited about the positive influence of Kinuka’s conversion. He recognized the feasibility of starting a spiritual renewal campaign for all African personnel in the Ruanda Mission.³

An excerpt from Moon’s doctoral research gives further introduction to the revival and its early leaders, including Blasion Kigozi and British missionary Joe Church. Biographies from the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, mostly from Uganda, further expand the narrative of the revival but the limited selection does not do justice to the wide geographical scope of the movement throughout East Africa or

¹ Annette Mukakigeri, interview by Michele Sigg, New Haven, CT, December 2022. Ms. Kikakigeri is the author of *A Barren Woman Had A Son* (Outskirts Press, 2022).

² Daewon Moon, *African Initiative and Inspiration in the East African Revival*, *Theology and Mission in World Christianity*, Vol. 24, (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

³ Moon, *African Initiative and Inspiration in the East African Revival*, 2-3.

to the role of women in this revival. I have yet to read any full biographies of women leaders in this movement and the stories of the wives of the foremost revivalists remain to be told. Where are the women's stories?

Next, thanks to the research and mission work of Ben I. Aram, this issue offers a fascinating (brief) account of Somali Christian history and the biographies of three Somali Christians. These stories are rare gifts to the global church.

Finally, Marc Spindler's biography of Pastor Albert Zakariasy, a theologian-turned-politician, describes a complex figure in Malagasy history, in FRENCH. Hopefully, the review of Emma Wild-Wood's recent book on *The Mission of Apolo Kivebulaya* and Beth Restruck's Book Notes will whet your appetite for more reading beyond this journal.