

Violent Conversion. Brazilian Pentecostalism and Urban Women in Mozambique. Linda van de Kamp. Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2016. 236 pp.

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Violent Conversion is an ethnography of upwardly mobile women and their engagement with, and transformation through, Brazilian Pentecostal churches in Mozambique's capital, Maputo. Linda van de Kamp traces how and why a specific brand of Neo-Pentecostalism became relevant especially to urban women in the context of contemporary, post-war, post-socialist, neoliberal Mozambique, and reveals how an element of violence has become central to the experience and performance of conversion.

Following a refreshingly candid methodology section, is a historical overview of changing women's roles in Mozambique, and Maputo more specifically that provides a context for the resonance of Brazilian Pentecostalism in Mozambique. Consecutive profound social changes — the *mfecane* wars of the early 19th Century leading to widespread population displacement, male migrant wage labor to South Africa, Portuguese colonialism, the war of independence, state socialism and the current neoliberal democratic system have impacted gender roles especially in the city. While wage labor, socialism, and economic liberalization from the 1990s on have afforded women more professional and financial independence, this independence has also unsettled previous social norms and kinship obligations. This uncertainty about gender and family relations is extended to the spiritual realm: colonial authorities and Christian missionaries already viewed traditional beliefs with suspicion, but this was expanded after independence, when the then Marxist-Leninist ruling party, the Mozambican Liberation Front, Frelimo, set out to create a “new man” (*homem novo*) based on the principles of scientific socialism, and actively

combated any forms of “tribal obscurantism.” Social institutions like the payment of bridewealth (*lobolo*) or healing practices by *curandeiros* were shunned or banned outright. In recent years, however, van de Kamp observes, Frelimo has re-embraced “Mozambican tradition” as part of its nation-building project, thereby compounding Mozambicans’ uncertainties about the ways in which to engage with the spirit world.

Enter the Brazilian Neopentecostal churches, like the by now ubiquitous Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD) and its offshoot, the World Church of the Power of God. What van de Kamp terms “South-South transnational Pentecostal mobility” is central to the appeal of these churches. Despite a certain cultural proximity due to a shared Lusophone heritage, Brazilian pastors mark distance to the Mozambican cultural context, by regularly moving parishes, for example. By also demanding this distancing from their converts, the latter are given an opportunity for transnational mobility while staying in Mozambique, a mobility that is essential to achieve a certain type of modernity and upward social mobility. At the same time, Brazilian pastors translate understandings of the spiritual world taken from Afro-Brazilian religions—condemned as devilry—into Mozambican idioms. This allows them to claim authority over the spirit world, by openly rejecting Mozambican traditions in speech and acts, thereby proving the power of the Holy Spirit to the faithful.

Van de Kamp argues that this “pioneering” work of distancing is fraught with violence, as it consciously and actively creates tensions with the converts’ existing lifeworlds and social networks. Three violent techniques are central to this work of Brazilian Pentecostalism—breaking, confronting, and destroying—and she devotes a chapter to each. *Converting the Spirit Spouse* (chapter 4), details how Pentecostal women have to break with spirit spouses, or “night husbands” they were wedded to as consequence of

previous deeds by their parents or wider kin, allowing them to develop new forms of relationships, sexuality, and family. Through the practice of “love therapy,” (chapter 5) converts are introduced to Brazilian-style displays of affection and notions of marital relationships, actively confronting Mozambican kinship norms to train their bodies to realize the potentiality of their love lives. To make it easier to become free from kinship obligations, converts are also encouraged to tithe or make large “sacrifices” to the church (chapter 6); such monetary offerings force them to assert their autonomy from kin. In elaborating how converts need to develop “intelligent faith,” van de Kamp revisits the classic Africanist trope of the deleterious effects of kinship jealousy on the economic development of societies, and, though ultimately little is said about IURD as a business empire, also criticizes the financial practices of the Brazilian churches as excessive.

The dense detail van de Kamp offers about church practices allows her to return in the conclusion to her central argument, which is Brazilian Pentecostalism’s elective affinity with neoliberalism. Earlier analyses of Neo-Pentecostal faith and millennial capitalism read the prosperity gospel primarily as a reaction to neoliberalism, which despite new forms drew on established popular imaginaries of wealth and moral economies. Van de Kamp, by contrast, convincingly argues that the new religion and the new economy are in fact intimately enmeshed, and that Brazilian Pentecostalism is a self-governing technique that promotes self-responsibility and the “pioneering” seizing of opportunities in a volatile economic environment.

As the book is chiefly concerned with the power of of Neo-Pentecostalism, the question of conversion is as the center of the book’s analysis. So it is perhaps unfortunate that the ethnography only transmits the viscosity of the experience of conversion in light,

sparing touches (similarly examples of the love therapy come off as a bit coy). This appears to be due to the author's deep sympathy for her informants and a commendable refusal to exoticize her subject matter; however, given the centrality of violence to the author's argument, a somewhat more vigorous authorial voice might at points have helped convey the affective weight of the tensions and choices her informants were facing more forcefully.

Also, given that one central argument is about Neo-Pentecostal forms of worship are enmeshed with neoliberalism, it might have been worthwhile theorizing neoliberalism more explicitly, and expanding the discussion to see how the strategies of these upwardly mobile women in Maputo compare to other agentive strategies enmeshed with neoliberalism across Africa. How are the challenges and responses specific to the Pentecostal milieu, and how do these relate to current larger debates about the (African) middle class in anthropology?

These points and a few imprecise translations from Portuguese notwithstanding, *Violent Conversion* remains a vital contribution to discussions about Pentecostalism and the anthropology of Christianity, kinship and gender roles under neoliberalism, and urban studies in Mozambique.