

BOOK REVIEW

Peter J. Hoelsing. *Kusamira Music in Uganda: Spirit Mediumship and Ritual Healing*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021. xviii + 201 pp. List of Illustrations. Notes on Languages and Orthography. Acknowledgments. Bibliography. Index. \$19.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0252085819.

In southern Uganda, close to 80 percent of people visit traditional healers for medical care in addition to services they may receive from hospitals and clinics. Though much in demand, these healers are often vilified in the Ugandan press and their shrines attacked by zealous Christians. NGOs supporting traditional medicine, which proliferated during the peak years of Uganda's HIV/AIDS crisis, have taken the side of these healers. It was by way of one of these NGOs, PROMETRA (Promotion des Médecines Traditionnelles), that Peter Hoelsing was able to conduct ethnographic research with a number of *basamize* (as spirit mediums are known in Buganda) and *baswezi* (as they are known in Basoga), which resulted in this book, *Kusamira Music in Uganda: Spirit Mediumship and Ritual Healing*. In Buganda, the healing tradition is *kusamira*, which means "releasing one's usual self to the embodiment of a spirit" (9). In Basoga, it is known as *nswezi*, after a specific drum that is used—although Basoga also use "kusamira" to refer to spiritual possession. This is an ancient and historically consequential tradition, the precolonial political and social manifestations of which have been explored by David Schoenbrun, Neil Kodesh, and others.

Ugandans visit *basamize* partly because the healers offer treatments for specific ailments on an affordable, fee-for-service, basis. Hoelsing argues, however, against a reductive view of *Kusamira* that sees in it only an assortment of herbal remedies targeting a variety of afflictions. He suggests that *basamize* conjure "ecologies of well-being," which symbolically weave together people, spirits, plants, and animals at potent geographical sites. A spirit-mediumship ritual is an occasion for a holistic, traditionalist re-imagination of the "good life." Participants are invited to experience themselves not as bounded individuals, but rather as "dividuals," whose existence spreads through social and ecological constellations.

The book's focus is mainly on the "repertoires of well-being" that constitute *kusamira*—that is, the songs, stories, ritual actions, and significant


objects that are woven together to summon an alternative reality (3). A great deal of effort has been devoted to the transcription, translation, and interpretation of song texts from the Luganda and Lusoga languages. This textual analysis is combined with ethnographic observation of kusamira rituals (sometimes participant-observation when Hoelsing was invited to play the drums). Hoelsing is mainly interested in the internal poetics of kusamira ritual, unpacking symbols and their dense interrelations. At times these symbolic analyses are presented in an omniscient-narrator style without immediate reference to the individuals from whom Hoelsing learned the information. While he does scrupulously acknowledge his Ugandan collaborators elsewhere in the book, expository passages in this style can give the impression of a crystalline, timeless, agreed-upon tradition that somehow exists apart from its present-day Ugandan narrators and their stakes in knowledge production.

Hoelsing's exegesis of symbolism in kusamira songs, ritual activities, and sacred objects is nonetheless impressive. "Binding" and "unbinding" (*okusiba* and *okusumulula*) emerge as prominent themes. Dangerous spirits must be safely tied up, while "blessings" must be unfettered so that they can flourish. This is a philosophy with multivalent applications and inspirations in the treatment of wounds and ailments, herbology/agriculture, and community building. Hoelsing's discussion of this traditional moral imaginary of binding/unbinding raises questions about recent moralistic episodes in Ugandan public life, and whether and to what degree these have been shaped by this same tradition. Is the currently surging anti-homosexuality crusade in the country based in the same ecological vision of evils that must be bound up, so that the good life can flourish? (The crusaders themselves certainly claim to have traditional morality on their side.) Or are these anti-homosexuality politics, with their insistence on total eradication of "foreign" sexual identities, actually antithetical to an arguably more accepting traditional morality expressed in kusamira?

Besides binding and unbinding, Hoelsing discusses "gathering," "sacrifice," and other concepts of kusamira ritual. He gives definitions for a cornucopia of Luganda and Lusoga terms not well defined in the available dictionaries, and connects them to their referents in the ritual. These lexical excursions, while intriguing to readers already versed in the languages, may make the book challenging for undergraduates who lack a linguistic foundation. The book is, on the other hand, clearly and unpretentiously written, which makes it accessible to those willing to tackle its detailed linguistic content. The musical staff notations prominently placed in the first chapters are interesting supplements, rather than objects for analysis, and readers do not need to be able to read them to grasp Hoelsing's arguments. His main musicological contention is that Kisoga/Kiganda traditional music is essentially "heterophonic," meaning that it entails one song being performed in diverse ways simultaneously, in accordance with broader, pluralistic ideals.

Overall, this is a unique and insightful exploration of a healing tradition which continues to occupy an important place in the lives of most Baganda

and Basoga today, despite the stigmatizing and repressive efforts of some powerful factions. This is not the kind of book that will provide health workers in Africa with straightforward, practical advice for, say, integrating aspects of traditional healing into biomedical projects. What it does do very well is reveal the cultural complexity of southern Uganda's healing tradition, while bringing into focus some fundamental, enduring Ugandan (and more broadly African) ways of thinking about health, society, nature, and the spirit world.

David Pier 

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,
North Carolina, USA*

dpier@email.unc.edu

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