

BOOK REVIEW

Devaka Premawardhana. *Faith in Flux. Pentecostalism and Mobility in Rural Mozambique*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 232 pp. Notes. Works cited. Index. Acknowledgments. \$49.95. Paper. ISBN 9780812249989.

This fascinating and unique book is the result of Devaka Premawardhana's journey of nearly one year to explore the local response to the recent arrival of Pentecostal churches in northern Mozambique. The chosen location for his fieldwork was the Maúá district, an area in the Niassa province and home to the Makhwa-speaking people. Although focused on a short period of time between 2011 and 2012, *Faith in Flux* is an account about movement, not linear and straightforward movement, but rather movement that is circular and complex.

Contrary to conventional narratives about the universal rise of Pentecostal conversions, Premawardhana finds a distinctive dynamic in the Maúá district, where “churches [are] arriving, but without always thriving” (10). According to the author, Maúá is home to four Pentecostal congregations of the African Assembly of God (ADA), which arrived from Zimbabwe in 1992, and the Evangelical Assembly of God (EAD), which was brought by Brazilian missionaries in 2001. Both churches seem to be in continuous flux. After a steady decline in the number of its attendees, the EAD—operating in Maúá town—managed to revive its ministry during the author's fieldwork year. Yet, Premawardhana chose to focus more on the rural areas of the Maúá district, where the ADA is more prominent. Most of his ethnographic material was collected in the village of Kaveya (population 700). Jemusse and Fatima's mud hut compound served as his headquarters. His hosts were especially well-suited for this enterprise, as they were among the most earnest participants in Kaveya's ADA church, and Jemusse also held a low-level leadership position, which connected him both to the Makhwa community and to the church.

Premawardhana brilliantly brings together religion and migration in what he identifies as a Makhuma culture of mobility, a historical experience and cultural practice based on the move. According to him, this culture of mobility has its particularities. It is, for starters, circular mobility. To explain such circularity, Premawardhana recalls the Makhwa foundational myth of Mount Namuli, in which Namuli is considered both a place of origin and a final destination for the Makhwa. “Upon death, the *munepa* (spirit) of a

person is restored to its first home: ‘From Namuli we come, to Namuli we return’” (46).

In the author’s view, this oscillatory dynamic—or even nature—delineates the distinctive behavior the Makhwa people have toward Pentecostalism. As a highly mobile people, Makhwa conversion to Pentecostalism follows suit. Such a mobility resonates, for instance, in their metaphor for conversion, *othama*, which can be translated as “to move.” This means that, as one can relocate geographically, one can also move between one religious setting and another.


Premawardhana illustrates his argument by recounting the case of Jessume and Fátima’s ten-year-old daughter, Luisinha, who breathed her last after being bitten by a snake. Not long after Luisinha’s funeral, Jemusse and Fátima moved to Maúia’s capital, for they had found out the real cause of their daughter’s death, which was that a sorcerer had sent the snake that bit her. Instead of undertaking a spiritual warfare, either through the Holy Spirit or through indigenous traditions, they resorted to mobility.

Premawardhana’s book makes a significant contribution to the literature. Theoretically, *Faith in Flux* falls under the grand debate about rupture and hybridity. It not only supports the ranks of those who advocate in favor of the recent theorizing of rupture, but it seeks to radicalize it. It does so by arguing that conversion—Pentecostal conversion in this case—“is less a matter of continuity *or* change than of the continuity *of* change” (8).

Methodologically, the author defines his work “as an anthropology of mobility—or, better, of existential mobility” (17). In particular, Premawardhana emphasizes the plasticity of personality. According to him, “the notion of existential mobility portrays the human being as several rather than singular, shifting rather than settled. If there is an essence to this kind of selfhood it would be its inbuilt multiplicity, its intrinsic mobility” (18). Following this logic, Premawardhana records a series of critical events, such as Luisinha’s snakebite, instead of focusing on Pentecostal religion and indigenous culture as objects of analysis. This approach “stretches individuals in ways not always predictable by or reducible to their ascribed identities” (17), which allows an examination of life in all its aspects—contingencies and norms, shadows and centers.

Faith in Flux opens a valuable avenue for future research. Underpinning this book is the understanding of Makhwas as a populace on the move or, in other words, delineated by its culture of mobility. But how does this speak to other cases of syncretism and religious tension in Mozambique and beyond? Building upon Premawardhana’s work, future scholars could reflect more on the intricate politics and strategies of Pentecostal churches themselves in relation to local cultures. Would Pentecostal pastors experience greater success if they were more open to “tradition?” Is the oscillation of the Makhwas a result of their culture of mobility or a consequence of Pentecostal rigidity? These are some questions that emerge from this rich and

inspiring book, which should be read by anyone interested in African Studies and anthropology of Christianity.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

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