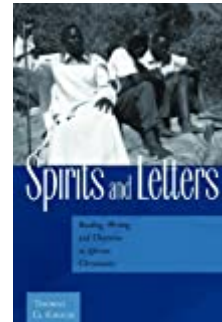




Thomas G. Kirsch. *Spirits and Letters: Reading, Writing, and Charisma in African Christianity.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2008. 304 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-483-8.



Reviewed by Allan Anderson (University of Birmingham)

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Literary Practices among Zambian Independents: Thomas G. Kirsch's *Spirits and Letter*

In this major anthropological study, Thomas Kirsch argues that the tendency on the part of scholars of religion to juxtapose “written” and “oral” does not take sufficient account of the importance of written texts to charismatic religious leaders in Africa—in this case, African independent church leaders in Zambia. In this, Kirsch takes issue with those scholars who have followed a Weberian paradigm of juxtaposing “charisma” and “institution” when referring to African Christians and their use of the Bible and much other literature. While there is some controversy over his overarching use of “Pentecostal-charismatic” to describe a church that is sometimes referred to as a “Spirit-type” church or usually as an “African independent church,” his monograph makes explicit what he means by this term. The pseudonymous “Spirit Apostolic Church” in this study is clearly a church of the “Apostolic” and “Zionist” variety in the southern African context. It might have been helpful to have used these terms rather than the academically more fashionable term “Pentecostal-charismatic,” of which this particular church is by no means paradigmatic.

The book is divided into four parts. The first deals with the histories of Zambia, particularly Christianity in the colonial period, and how colonial administrators and writers have dealt with questions of literacy and religion. Included is the interesting observation that Christian missionaries usually combined the functions of bureaucratic leader with that of religious leader, a practice that is continued in African churches. More specific details of practices and approaches of scholars in the area of southern Zambia covered by the fieldwork are outlined. The second part of the book deals with the context that affected the uses of literacy in this area, and particularly the use of the Bible by Christians and “traditionalists” alike. The third part deals with the different ways of reading the Bible and other religious texts in different kinds of Christian churches. The difference between the Pentecostal-charismatic churches and other like the Jehovahâs Witnesses and the New Apostolic Church lay in the dependence of the former on the “literacy enablement” of the Holy Spirit, while that of the others lay in the publica-

tions of their own Western denominational headquarters. The fourth part of the book brings an overarching theory to bear in considering the fieldwork further. It suggests that a “bureaucratic spirituality” with these two functions held in creative tension and at times conflated characterizes the “Pentecostal-charismatic” African church under scrutiny. This is particularly the case with the position of church secretary. Sometimes the tension between bureaucracy and spirituality creates conflict, but the conclusion of this study is that bureaucratization, far from hindering spirituality, actually promotes it in these churches.

The book stresses the importance of the role of the Spirit *and* the Letter in these often-misunderstood “churches of the Spirit.” It is frustrating for a reader interested in African Christianity that the emphasis on pseudonymity means that Kirsch has disguised the identity of the main church in his study—especially as one familiar with the Gwembe valley in Zambia (where most of the fieldwork took place) would easily discover this from the thick descriptions and photographs in the book. Nevertheless, the primary aim of the author lies not in the ethnography itself but in challenging the presuppositions made in the study of African religion—and in this he has admirably succeeded.

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