

## AFRICAN WOMEN AND REVIVAL: THE CASE OF THE EAST AFRICAN REVIVAL

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### ABSTRACT

Fed up with conventional religion, people have pursued a revival or an awakening. This article examines the twentieth century East African revival and its impact to womenfolk. The East African revival as a movement sought to transform the spiritual situation of the missionary Church. It came about due to amongst other things, uncertainty of the times and the slothfulness of the Church. The East African revival had enormous implications on families culturally, socially and even economically. This article brings to fore characteristics of Balokole women after conversion exemplified in their dress code, cleanliness and confessional practice. It highlights significant changes to the lives of womenfolk in their cuisine, hospitality and in their rejection of versions of polygyny. It further shows that revival focused attention on the home beyond cleanliness and hospitality even as married women were frequently among the first to hear their husband's confessions of their behaviours such as drinking, abuse or adultery.

**Keywords:** Revival, East African revival, Balokole, Women in East Africa, The Church, Confession.

### INTRODUCTION

Revival refers to a specific period of increased spiritual interest, vigour, energy or renewal in the life of a church congregation. This has been often described using bible citations such as one from the book of Joel stated as "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy".<sup>iii</sup> Inherent in revival are Pentecostal streams that cause changes in places and congregations. According to Harvey Cox, Pentecostalism exhibits phenomenal power to embrace and transform almost anything it meets in the cultures to which it travels. To him Pentecostalism gives remarkable energy and creativity even as the message of the gospel is sung, taught and celebrated with heartfelt enthusiasm.<sup>iv</sup>

But who takes centre stage in such revivalist or Pentecostal meetings? Cox maintains that in such worship service literally anyone can be filled with the spirit, testify or prophesy. In such meetings there is a strong egalitarian momentum.<sup>v</sup> To him, wherever original Pentecostal fire fell, women shone and seemed to play a leading role. These women participated fully even in churches where the pastor was male. Further, women more than men have become the bearers of the Pentecostal gospel.<sup>vi</sup>

According to Larsson, anyone who does not also look at the Revival from women's perspective will fail to see the full implication of changes brought about by the equality preached, the openness in confession and the changed lifestyle.<sup>vii</sup> These changes saw married women become the first to hear their husband's confessions of their behaviours such as drinking, abuse or adultery.<sup>viii</sup>

However, it has been argued that there was never an age when women were treated equally, since even the first Pentecostals had come from other denominations that had established biases. Even if women could prophecy, this was thought not to need brains since prophets were but conduits of God's message and one did not need any brains to be a mouthpiece.<sup>ix</sup> Still others maintain that some revival movements have ensured the importance of women and allowed for egalitarian relations between males and females.<sup>x</sup>

### LITERATURE REVIEW: THE EAST AFRICAN REVIVAL

The East African Balokole (the saved ones) has been said to be the most famous movement of renewal within the protestant churches of East Africa.<sup>xi</sup> The Balokole 'revival' grew out of the Rwanda mission, a conservative evangelical wing of the Church Missionary Society, hereafter referred to as CMS. The spiritual fellowship between the English doctors and African orderlies in Rwanda led to the emergence of the revival that spread to other countries in East Africa. Dr. Joe Church arrived in Rwanda in 1927 with the Oxford groups' practice of public confession.

The interaction between Church and his Ganda assistants produced revival whose first convention was held at Gahini, Rwanda in September 1931. A young leader Kosiya Shalita, a Tutsi from Ankole was among the group, who later was ordained the Anglican Bishop of Ankole. In an Anglican CMS hospital in Rwanda, the medical doctor Church and African orderly at the hospital could be found on the floor kneeling together before the same saviour and finding one another in Christ. From this geographical location in Rwanda, the movement spread to Uganda, western Tanzania and to western Kenya. This revival had a far reaching impact on all Christians in the region irrespective of denominations.<sup>xii</sup>

Though the first pioneers in each region and country faced a lot of resistance, the movement hurried along winning adherents in the tens of thousands.<sup>xiii</sup> In Kenya, the railway men spread the gospel through evangelisation as they moved from station to station as employees. These men stood confessing their sin in public and at times crying, asking for forgiveness.<sup>xiv</sup> People in the churches were looking out for more radical personal messages. Annual conventions followed in different places, with people putting away sin, beer-drinking and reading the bible. This is in tandem to what Philomena Mwaura notes in African Independent Churches. Her study in Nairobi slums showed that AIC's maintain a puritan ethic with rules such as no smoking, no drinking, no sexual immorality or gambling. Further, these members consider a person's healing as communal. The confession of sins and repentance, the role of the prophet in discerning the sins of people remains to date a communal affair.<sup>xv</sup> The denunciations of worldliness by the revivalists were deeply shocking.<sup>xvi</sup> They repeated testimonies about sin and overcoming sin by total surrender to Christ.

In 1937, the revival held its convention in Kenya, in 1939 the conventions were in Tanganyika and in Sudan. This revival was a lay association, an ongoing fellowship linked in its ethos and the singing of its famous Luganda hymn 'Tukutendereza Yezu' (We magnify thee).<sup>xvii</sup> Most of the first group of African Bishops came from its ranks. The Balokole were

anti-traditionalists who rejected bride-wealth and all the customary food taboos. The revival changed the climate of protestant churches in East Africa due to this evangelical infusions and warm fellowship. It has been said to be a huge protest against one form of Africanization and appropriation of Christianity, not through hierarchy or school but through a decentralized association unified by its singing and certain basic forms of behaviour. This movement was seen as genuinely African movement, though with a borrowed initial inspiration from Europe.

This association held considerable numbers of people in active Christian commitment. Through this movement and similar ones around the continent, the Church was able to switch from depending upon abroad for its vitality and deepening its roots locally.

The 1930's and climaxing in the 1950's brought a new lease of life to the Anglican dioceses of East Africa following the East African Revival. For many years, the great lay and ordained leaders of the revival were Baganda, such as William Nagenda, a revivalist preacher on the world scale. Revival cut across the established order of the church, affecting theological colleges such as the Anglican one in Mukono. Revival created a thirst for the living waters, sometimes implying a critical attitude to the teaching given at the colleges.

As a lay movement, doctors, teachers, builders, drivers, home-makers and others testified of the new found life and came out as active members of the fellowship. The common experience of salvation and brokenness allowed for the new relationship between the white and the black in the church.

In general, the East African revival was a movement that sought to transform the spiritual situation of the missionary Church. It responded to the decay and deadness in the churches said to be as a result of churches being alienated from the power of God. Revivalist confessional practice in eastern Africa enabled many women to reject versions of polygyny in western Kenya. This movement helped the work of the CMS tremendously in East Africa.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study will use textual Studies from available literature, journal articles, books and other sources. Published texts in the form of books, journal articles and newspapers articles were used. The choice of materials was made for literature that support, analyses, critiques and sheds light on the varied themes indicated the article. As researchers we remained aware that we were constantly making choices at different points in the process of research, such as the formulation of the research questions and in the analysis of data. The results were then divided into the following sections, factors that precipitated the East African Revival; Characteristics of the Balokole women movement and the impact of the Balokole revival on womenfolk and their homes.

## **RESULTS**

### **Factors that Precipitated the East African Revival**

There are various factors that may be said to trigger off revival in a place. Though there are many other factors, hereafter, we suggest but five such factors. One such factor is eagerness and inspiration to hear something new. Ritualistic teachings and repeated sermons has become the order of the day. There was spiritual coldness from the pulpit to the entire membership. Hearing repentance and renewal was something new. This is what the leaders of the Balokole revival preached.<sup>xviii</sup>

The second factor is sin and slothfulness in the church. According to the revivalists, Christianity had lost its vitality by tolerating secret sins, particularly those relating to traditional beliefs, dishonesty, petty crimes and sexual misconduct such as adultery and polygamy. To them, true salvation and higher spiritual life could only be received and experienced when these deeds were made public. Low moral standards and spiritual slothfulness among the leaders and members of the church was witnessed.<sup>xxix</sup> The revival therefore, had a strong emphasis on the need for repentance of sins and on sole reliance on the atoning work of Christ on the cross.<sup>xxx</sup>

The third factor is the uncertainty of the times and elusiveness of prosperity. People in Uganda and Rwanda were convinced that the end of the world was near, so they sought to make their lives conform to what was needed so as to inherit eternal life. He adds that in 1939, missionaries found many people gathered in a church compound crying uncontrollably, and when one woman was asked why this was happening, she answered, "Because I am on the way to destruction".<sup>xxxi</sup> People were sure about the imminent end of the world and this led other to act in radical ways.<sup>xxxii</sup> In sum, revival converts through of themselves to be pilgrims on a journey from this life to the next.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The fourth factor is being fed up with conventional religiosity. The East African revival sought to transform the spiritual situation of deadness in the church. Nominal Christianity has to make way for a vibrant move of God. There were many members of churches who were just members without real conversion. These were led in confession of sin and made to know understand the saving power of Christ.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The fifth factor is need for signs and wonders in the church. Church members had a desire for the demonstrated presence of the Holy Spirit and the workings of God where signs and wonders accompany the word of God. This quest led to small groups of Christians meeting together for prayer so that God would demonstrate God's power for all to see.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BALOKOLE MOVEMENT WOMEN**

Balokole women would confess a wide range of sins, sins of omission and commission such as jealousy, anger, malice, gossip and harbouring a grudge. Their prayers and cries were an expression of their efforts to search their hearts of all failings that may stand in their way to get into the communion of saints. Some of their prayers were in sobs and groans or resounding wails and cries.<sup>xxxv</sup> The Balokole were convinced that everyone had secrets that were detrimental to their spiritual health, and they worked tirelessly to ensure that these sins were made public – both their own failings and those of others.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Public confessions by both women and men opened up new space for women. African women had traditionally been victims of oppression and muteness in society. Often women having been silenced in society, their voices remained unheard because of the power structures. In traditional patriarchal societies in Africa, it was often said that women were to be seen but not be heard. Within the Balokole revival context, the power of God came upon women and became the voice of the voiceless, the power of the powerless. This empowered women to be less inhibited and muted, giving them power and voice to speak for themselves.

Balokole women were anti-traditionalists. They were so intolerant of African customs, castigating them. This was also the case for Balokole men.<sup>xxxvii</sup> It is known that the Balokole,

including their women members became famous for their refusal to participate in oath-taking ceremonies of the Mau Mau at great personal risk.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Balokole women rejected food taboos. Converts dining ways were seen to undermine social habits. Apparently, converts made it a point of dining on taboo foods to show that they were changed and different.<sup>xxix</sup> For example women were not to eat eggs or goat meat. According to Hastings, this rejection of food taboos was a highly unifying action. Certain basic forms of behaviour tended to unify the Balokole and this was one of them.<sup>xxx</sup>

Balokole women converts rejected bride-wealth and even changed their dress code. They changed their attires, shaved their hair and removed the amulets they wore traditionally.<sup>xxxi</sup> Further, they marked their conversion by taking off their veils and wearing simple cotton dresses.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Balokole women converts joined in singing Tukutendereza Yesu, and this singing was a unifying factor amongst them and other households of the Balokole. They gave testimonies of what the Lord had done for them. Some shared their dreams and had Pentecostal expressions such as shaking of the body during prayers even as they spoke in tongues.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Before the coming of Christianity and colonialism, African women were regarded as having gifts such as healings, prophecy, exorcisms, which were exercised voluntarily, and which were embraced in African religion. The missionary churches generally considered African women's healings, prophecy and exorcism "strange gifts". By calling them this, they alienated the women that exercised these gifts, making them outcasts and unable to receive the respect they deserved.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

However, unlike missionary Christianity, where women's manifestation of their spirituality was reduced or cerebralized, the Balokole revival allowed women to freely exercise their spirituality. Accommodating the "strange" gifts of African women in part reduced the alternative schismatic tendencies that resulted in the formation of African Independent Churches.

## **THE IMPACT OF THE BALOKOLE REVIVAL ON WOMENFOLK AND THEIR HOMES**

Some have opted to see revivalists as subversives on the political and cultural landscapes. As Derek Peterson points out that an examination of the Revival provides new insights into the nature of conversion as well as political dissent in the East African context.<sup>xxxv</sup> In so doing he is able to place these revivalists within their specific sociocultural and political contexts. On the other hand, some scholars have argued that patriotic men's efforts to order their households was significantly challenged by testimonies of women converts who opened up the whole arena of private life to public view. This to them undermined the patriots efforts to manage appearances.<sup>xxxvi</sup> However, the East African revival made an impact on women in East Africa. By the time of the revival in the 1930's, basically the home was an important sphere of operation for the womenfolk and several changes took place there.

First, there was a high valuation of clean, sober living among the Balokole. Balokole womens' homes were known to be clean and organised. The Balokole became dedicated to personal and domestic cleanliness. Very many dirty habits were discarded and even drinking water was boiled.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The establishment of common high standards of cleanliness is often cited among the Balokole as contributing to their longevity, but shared standards of cleanliness and hospitality also eased previous tribal barriers as well.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Second, the Balokole women developed a new ethic of hospitality.<sup>xxxix</sup> The Balokole became persons apt to hospitality. These women became exposed and improved on their hospitality skills. They were able to host guest in their houses and even redesigned their houses to fit the traffic in their homes. They devised new domestic arrangements.<sup>xl</sup> The revivalists were known to be travellers, users of the Post Office and eager participants in cosmopolitan gatherings like gospel conventions.<sup>xli</sup>

Third, the Balokole marriages became more mutual. According to Brunen, a new sense of mutuality and partnership between husbands and wives emerged.<sup>xlii</sup> Husbands would confess their sins to their wives prior to attending meetings. There were sometimes when husbands refused to testify publicly in the absence of their wives. Many bad unchristian habits were confessed and discarded such as immorality, polygamy and witchcraft.<sup>xliii</sup> These revival characteristics can be credited for the maintaining of a lower divorce rate among the Balokole.

Fourth, the Balokole women did not fear to be confrontational and thus fearlessly spoke out, which to them was a way of walking in the light. They spoke against complacent compromise with all manner of sin. This fearlessness made Balokole women stand out as courageous and decided.<sup>xliv</sup> The plain speaking and direct confrontation was interpreted as disobedience and stubbornness. Many saw it as a reversal of the deference entrenched in African social norms.<sup>xlv</sup>

Fifth, Balokole women and generally the entire revival movement stressed intense solidarity of the group and even made a point to look after widows.<sup>xlvi</sup> Concern for the needy and the less fortunate in the society became the norm and in this way many widows were saved from premature death, even as they converted and were set into 'families' of brethren who would care for them. In turn the widows maintained their devotion to God in prayer, fastings and in teaching the young women.

Sixth, the conviction that everyone has a responsibility to spread the word made wives bring their husbands to the Churches and this made them forgo their macho posturing of marrying many wives and fulfilling cultural ethos. Wives brought their children and their in-laws and these testified to one another. Consequently, women experienced changes in their family relations. According to Allan Anderson, the experience of the Spirit and belief in world evangelisation remain the hallmarks of Pentecostalism. This has further led to the growth of pentecostalism which has its origins in a series of revival movements.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Seventh, women were able to help their husbands use their resources well, that is for the family welfare and to help in church work. Balokole members were more generous in giving to the church making the collections of the church sizeable.<sup>xlviii</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Besides the positive aspects of the revival as mentioned above, it has been pointed out that the revival did have some weaknesses, such as offensive confessions of adultery, where peoples names were mentioned in the audience of children. Some revivalists became too particular on their dress code. Others preached tactlessly, using condemnatory sermons.<sup>xlix</sup> Indeed, adopting Balokole norms, put a number of women at odds with tribal and clan elders and traditional moral codes. They disregarded some taboos and practices that secured traditional communal cohesion and protection.<sup>l</sup> Balokole collided with the Mau Mau and

refused to repudiate Christianity by taking the oaths that were being administered. In this way, many lost their lives. Also Balokole clashes with Idi Amin cost the lives of many including Archbishop Janani Luwum and other martyrs both women and men.<sup>li</sup>

Other than a transformation of the life of the Church, women experienced the impact of the revival and it affected their immediate surroundings in a unique way. The revival paid attention beyond the home, cleanliness and hospitality even as women's lifestyles changed. They carried themselves with characteristic features that exemplified their conversion status. These women went preaching to many and their homes were never the same again. Through these women, family units became cohesive even as their children were educated and exposed. This article has pointed out but a few implications of changes brought about by the revival to womenfolk of the time.

## NOTES

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<sup>iii</sup> See Joel 2:23.

<sup>iv</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The rise of Pentecostal spirituality and the reshaping of religion in the twenty-first century* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 147.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid. 124-125.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>vii</sup> Birgitta Larsson, *Conversion to Greater Freedom? Women, Church and Social change in North Western Tanzania* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1991), 145.

<sup>viii</sup> Jason Bruner, "Public Confession and the Moral Universe of the East African Revival," *Studies in World Christianity* 18.3 (2012): 261.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>x</sup> In reference to the Balokole movement, Hastings maintains that there was a difference in how males related to females within this movement. Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 598.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> Medard Ruyendo, *A handbook of African Church History* (Limuru, Kenya: Zapf Chancery, 2012), 79–80.

<sup>xiii</sup> Jason Bruner, "Public Confession and the Moral Universe of the East African Revival," *Studies in World Christianity* 18.3 (2012): 254–268.

<sup>xiv</sup> Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 865.

<sup>xv</sup> Philomena Mwaura, "A Spirituality of Resistance and Hope: African Instituted Churches' response to Poverty" in *A New Day: Essays on World Christianity in Honor of Lamin Sanneh*, ed. Akintunde E. Akinade. (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 129–131.

<sup>xvi</sup> Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950*, 598.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xviii</sup> Steven Paas, *The Faith Moves South: A History of the Church in Africa* (Malawi: Kachere series, Lightning Source, 2006), 149.

<sup>xix</sup> Ruyendo, *A handbook of African Church History*, 80.

<sup>xx</sup> Kevin Ward, "Africa", in *A World History of Christianity*, ed. Adrian Hastings (London: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 224.

- <sup>xxi</sup> Derek Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of dissent, c. 1935–1972* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 50.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid. 65.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Peterson makes a case that there was a pervading influence on the revival converts from the book *Pilgrims progress* by Bunyan, which around the time was being translated to the native languages. The use of this book among the congregations made them more conscious of the pilgrims lifestyle that they were to emulate. Ibid. 51–52.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Paas, *The Faith Moves South*, 149.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Not everyone looked favourable on the revivalists' testimonies. Critics saw these open confessions as marks of converts' antisocial character. Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, 71.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Bruner, "Public Confession and the Moral Universe of the East African Revival", 256.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Generally, Peterson maintains that converts offered a subversive reading of culture, disavowing their compatriots and disregarding their obligations to kin. He casts religious conversion in a new light: not as an inward reorientation of belief, but as a political action that opened up space for self-narration and unsettled tradition. See, Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Ward, "Africa", 224.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, 72.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950*, 599.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, 72.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Ibid. 73
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Ruyendo, *A handbook of African Church History*, 83.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Susannah Herzel, *A Voice for Women: The Women's Department of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1981), 68.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Derek Peterson, "Revivalism and Dissent in colonial East Africa," in *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*, ed. Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 105-118.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, 27.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Ruyendo, *A handbook of African Church History*, 84.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Bruner, "Public Confession and the Moral Universe of the East African Revival", 260.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Ibid. 261.
- <sup>xl</sup> Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, 38.
- <sup>xli</sup> Ibid. 4.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Bruner, "Public Confession and the Moral Universe of the East African Revival", 261.
- <sup>xliii</sup> Ruyendo, *A handbook of African Church History*, 83.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Ward, "Africa", 224.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Kevin Ward, "Revival, Mission and Church in Kigezi, Rwanda and Burundi," in *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*, ed. Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 19.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Allan Heaton Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of world Christianity* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Ruyendo, *A handbook of African Church History*, 84.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Ibid. 86.
- <sup>l</sup> Bruner, "Public Confession and the Moral Universe of the East African Revival", 262.
- <sup>li</sup> Paas, *The Faith Moves South*, 151.

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