

BOOK REVIEW

Nicole Eggers. *Unruly Ideas: A History of Kitawala in Congo*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2023. New African Histories series. 291 pp. \$34.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0821426081.

How did Congolese people conceive of power? *Unruly Ideas* examines the evolving connections between spiritual power, resistance to state authority, and the ability to heal and harm in the case of the Kitawala religious movement that emerged in what is now the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo by the 1920s and 1930s. Academic research on this movement reflects the changing concerns and conceptualization of historians of Africa. Colonial officials claimed Kitawala was a confused mixture of indigenous spirituality with the radical critiques of the Jehovah Witness movement threatening the colonial order and established African gendered and political norms. Historians such as John Higginson viewed Kitawala as a means of galvanizing colonial authorities, focusing on its consequences for labor history and anti-colonial resistance more than on its concepts of power or its intellectual genealogies. By contrast, *Unruly Ideas* draws on the culturalist and linguistic approaches that have become the dominant orientation of academic African historians in the last three decades. In particular, this study highlights the transmission of the various strands of belief within different Kitawala communities: the conceptualization of power and healing and how it diffused over time, the movement of people who spread knowledge of Kitawala, and the ways colonial and postcolonial state authorities tried unsuccessfully to tame and control these beliefs.

Kitawala proved remarkably successful defying easy categorization. Instead of looking at Kitawala as ultimately originating from the teachings of Jehovah Witnesses, Eggers' informants contended their beliefs transcended any binary between "traditional" and Christian origins. Congolese prophets are viewed as the founders of the movement, not owing anything to European or North American missionaries. Quite differently than the emphasis on formal bureaucracy and sharp hierarchies of authority within the Kimbanguist church, Kitawala believers differ substantially in terms of ritual practice and maintain separate organizations. Kitawala believers generally agree in their rejection of state authority and their emphasis on natural sites as part of their ability to heal, yet they did not try to constitute a single institution that enforced a particular set of theological views.

One of the main strengths of this study is how carefully it probes Belgian colonial records about Kitawala. European officials deemed Kitawala to be a dangerous cult, encouraging revolts against white authority and preying on the supposedly credulous nature of Africans. Chapter Three considers the 1944

Lobutu-Masisi revolt, led by Kitawalists. Based on testimony collected by colonial officials, the rebellion was both an effort to cleanse communities of evil occult power as much as it was aimed at ending forced labor and abuses by colonial troops. Ezimet Kisangani's recent work upholds the *soi-disant* rationality of Belgian rule in comparison to postcolonial African regimes, but Belgian efforts to crush Kitawala in the 1940s and 1950s appear in retrospect quite irrational in their own right. Colonial authorities claimed Kitawalists were sexual deviants, for example, although these lurid accounts suggest more about the anxieties of Belgian officials than reflecting gender norms within the movement. Eggers' informants denied colonial-era accusations of sharing wives, for example, but these records do correspond with oral testimonies about the importance of women in spreading Kitawalist beliefs. The fanciful construction of one remote prison for Kitawalists resembled a Belgian medieval town, yet Kitawalists incarcerated there referenced the Atlantic Charter and human rights rhetoric in their discussions with their captors. Even as this fantasy literally crumbled as independence came in 1960, the site became a place of pilgrimage for later generations of Kitawalists. Wild novelistic accounts of the movement penned by Belgian officials ended up incorporated into later Kitawalist teachings.

Postcolonial authorities found Kitawala as troublesome as their Belgian antecedents. Mobutu Sese Seko's dictatorship tried to co-opt spiritual as well as secular movements to prevent them from undermining the government, but Kitawalists refused to surrender their autonomy. Martyred prime minister Patrice Lumumba became another holy figure among some Kitawalists as well, allowing them to again claim to shape the nation as a whole despite remaining on the margins. Within the crowded spiritual marketplace of contemporary eastern Congo, Kitawalists continue to promote their claims of healing to other Congolese and to foreign development organizations like UNICEF. One is left wondering how evangelical and Pentecostal churches relate to Kitawala's distance from their theological and social positions.

As with most current historical research in the DRC, the material foundation of how Kitawalists operate is hard to discern. How do pastors manage economic resources and do they profit from their position in ways similar to other Protestant clergy, for example? More attention to political economy would better indicate the structural limits placed on the agency so vividly captured here. Raising these concerns does not take away from the impressive analytical achievements of *Unruly Bodies*. This book would be particularly useful in graduate courses that engage with methodological questions in African history. Eggers certainly has succeeded in expanding what she rightly describes as a "shrunk historiography" in regard to the Congolese past, yet there is much here for any readers interested in questions of power, spirituality, and intellectual history in Africa.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2024.76