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1

Introduction

This book is an historical ethnography of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, and of the Kanungu fire itself. As such, it begins with an exploration of the social context from which this particular African-Initiated Church (AIC)¹ emerged in the mid-1980s, and with an attempt to define the cultural archive which informed that process of genesis. The book's central argument is that the MRTC grew out of, and was located within, a specific – historically and geographically located – set of logics and practices related to attempts to gain redress for misfortune. Moreover, that this helps us to understand why the group later grew rapidly – during the early-mid 1990s – given that this was a period during which South-western Uganda was experiencing what was perhaps the worst social misfortune in the region's entire history: the emergent AIDS epidemic. Thus, it was as people attempted to come to terms with this new disease, and to deal with its worst effects, that they increasingly turned to the MRTC for support (and the reasons why they turned to this particular AIC, rather than to the mainstream church, or to some other sort of organization altogether, will also be elaborated upon). From here, then, the book explores what these historical dimensions tell us about life inside the MRTC, about its modes of social organization and ritual practice, about its politics and theology, and so on. In these ways, one of the book's central aims is to develop a detailed ethnographic reconstruction of the Movement, one based on interviews with surviving protagonists and former members, discussions with the relatives and friends of those who died, and so on. Finally, the book will return to the detective mystery with which it opened, to examine the question of what did, then, happen at Kanungu?

However, I begin here by noting one of the apparently more curious features of the MRTC story, as this was recorded both by the police and by journalists, at the time. According to practically every eyewitness to the events of March and April 2000, and quite unusually for an African AIC of this type, many of the MRTC's former activities seemed to have been conducted in a high degree of secrecy. Thus, upon arrival at the scene on 18 March, Assuman Mugenyi quickly ascertained that few Kanungu residents were able to tell him very much about the MRTC, given that everything the sect had done had been 'so secretive'. He established that the whole Kanungu compound had been effectively closed to outsiders, even to

¹ Throughout this book, I refer to independent African churches as 'African-Initiated Churches' following the usage set down by Anderson (2001).

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near neighbours.² Nor did the group's neighbours have any other way of finding out what went on at the site. Not only did most of the sect's activities take place behind closed doors, or in the middle of the night, but, on the few occasions that they did venture outside, they always did so with a view to concealing their activities.

Thus, for example, one local resident recalled one occasion on which a small group of MRTC members had gathered by a stream on the edge of the group's property in order to conduct some sort of ritual. Out of curiosity, the young man had climbed a nearby tree in order to get a better view of what was going on. However, he was himself soon spotted by the group, who proceeded to hurriedly gather up some objects they had with them, and to run off in the direction of their compound's main buildings. Moreover, such behaviour did not seem to be uncommon amongst the MRTC's members. Indeed, some local residents reported that even their daily work parties – which might be involved in sowing fields or pruning banana plantations – commonly refused to have any such contact with other residents. It later also transpired that on those occasions when sect members had ventured into Kanungu trading centre on errands – to purchase food and supplies, and the like – they had always moved about entirely in silence, speaking neither to other residents nor even amongst themselves. Both the police and journalists were later able to confirm that these same general patterns had been repeated at all of the MRTC's other compounds, as well. Indeed, at several compounds, the sect had even erected high fences around their buildings, in order to stop outsiders from being able to see inside them at all. I would add that, over the course of my own research on the sect, I documented a range of additional ways in which the sect demonstrated a commitment to secrecy.

Far from being a curious aside, these examples of the sect's secretive nature are indicative of the fact that, for much of its history, the MRTC is best understood as having been a secret network, or series of networks. For this reason, the study of this one group also offers more general insight into concealed, and informal, social assemblages of this type. In particular, it speaks to such broader questions as what makes secret networks such a compelling – in some cases a primary – mode of social action? How and why do they become reworked, or in other ways transformed, over time (and what are the consequences of these transformations)? And – perhaps most importantly of all – how and why do they sometimes become violent in nature? Finally, the study of this particular secret network, or series of networks, also enables us to think about how an anthropologist – or indeed any social researcher – might engage with the study of this sort of social phenomenon and, in a reflexive move, think about how this engagement shapes his or her analysis.

Moreover, in all of these ways, this study also speaks to a wider set of social forces, such as have shaped various other key events in the recent

² The few visitors who did, occasionally, stay at the compound were required to live in small guest quarters in a 'gatehouse' building at the front of the site, and were barred from venturing any further into the premises (food being served to the guests through a hatch at the back of their building).

history of the Great Lakes region. After all, it was an informal secret network with some similarities to the one examined here which was largely responsible for the planning, and the implementation, of the Rwandan genocide in 1994 (the so-called *akaju*; see, for example, des Forges, 1999). In addition, it is secret networks of this sort which have continued to shape events in the war-affected parts of the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (see, for example, the *Final report of the group of experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo*, 12 December 2008). Thus, although this book is not a comparative study, its case study nevertheless addresses a series of questions that might equally be posed in other regional contexts. Moreover, its exegesis develops a series of insights, and offers a series of clues, that might further assist our understanding of other, more tumultuous, events as well.

On secrecy and misfortune

A key insight of this book is that, for much of its history, the MRTC is best understood as a transformation of a locally meaningful set of logics and practices which were formerly attached to a fertility goddess called Nyabingi (pronounced: '*nya-bin-ji*'). In an important sense, then, the MRTC was but the latest manifestation of the long-standing Nyabingi phenomenon. However, it is not possible to grasp the nature of this connection, nor to understand exactly how and why this sort of phenomenon should have again risen to such prominence in South-western Uganda at this particular point in time (in the late 1980s, and into the 1990s) after more than half a century of apparent obscurity, without a re-examination of the historiography of earlier manifestations of Nyabingi. In particular, and as I shall argue at length in the next chapter, it is necessary to challenge here what has been a continual over-emphasis, both by colonial administrators and by previous historians of the subject, of Nyabingi's former anti-colonial aspects. In all of these earlier accounts, Nyabingi was understood primarily as a political 'society', or 'organization', or 'cult' – or, in other words, as some sort of a bounded and coherent group – which emerged in Rwanda and South-western Uganda in the early twentieth century, as a challenge to the new colonial presence.

Furthermore, by this logic, it was precisely because of its anti-colonial nature that it became so secretive – which would have been a necessity, of course, for avoiding detection by the authorities – *and* why it later turned violent: such violence as would have been primarily aimed at disrupting the colonial order. Hence also why this 'society' should have then more or less disappeared by about the mid-1930s, both as the colonial authorities became more adept at disrupting its activities and – more importantly – as local populations became more engaged with, and more accommodating of, the ongoing colonial presence.

It is indisputable that, throughout the early years of the twentieth century, Nyabingi certainly *did* act as a vehicle for anti-colonial sentiment (and between 1915 and 1928, for example, Nyabingi followers certainly did

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undertake a series of violent attacks against administration outposts). However, it is my argument that this was by no means its *raison d'être*, but instead simply one outcome of the broader role Nyabingi played in Kiga society as a mechanism of gaining redress for misfortunes (of which the European arrival was but one). By focusing on this one factor alone, however, by emphasizing only Nyabingi's more political aspect, the earlier literature has acted to obscure, perhaps even deny, the ways in which Nyabingi addressed *other* types of misfortunes as well. As I shall discuss in the next chapter, there were at least two additional ways in which the fertility spirit was typically drawn upon during times of misfortune.

Firstly, in the event of household sickness, or infertility (occurrences which are encompassed by a single term in Rukiga, *engumba*), one member of the household, usually one of its women, would begin to receive visions from the spirit (*okworekwa*).³ In most instances, these apparitions would be experienced while the woman involved was moving through some 'liminal' social space (such as hilltop rangeland), or else in her dreams at night. Nyabingi was always more likely to appear in such liminal contexts, given that she was an entity firmly located in a domain 'above', or 'beyond', or 'outside' ordinary social and temporal existence (a concept which is captured by the Rukiga category of *ahaiguru*). During these visitations, the spirit would both claim responsibility for the problem at hand, and instruct the afflicted woman to attend a local Nyabingi medium, or 'handmaiden' (as May Edel terms these actors) in order to seek redress. In the context of the subsequent meetings, the medium would then consult Nyabingi on the woman's behalf, and, crucially, would demand sizeable payment both for her own interventions, and for the spirit's appeasement (with further payments being made in the event of a 'successful outcome').

Now, I say *crucially* here, because these payments (*okutoija*) were in many ways central to the whole sociology of Nyabingi. Specifically, the size of these payments was often far greater than any one household could ever, by itself, afford – demands for several cows and a bundle of produce in one go were far from uncommon – and, thus, anyone trying to make *okutoija* was invariably forced to borrow additional goods, or to seek pledges for such loans, from any number of other people. Throughout both the colonial archive and the ethnographic record, accounts of Nyabingi are replete with descriptions of the sizeable amounts of goods that were exchanged in the spirit's name, as individuals entered into such loan arrangements not only with their kin, but also with their reciprocal bond-partners, their other friends, their neighbours, and so on. Given the sheer volume of the goods involved in these transactions, it is not coincidental that the very word Nyabingi means, literally: 'she who has many things'. Indeed, so widespread were these exchanges, that they commonly formed webs, or networks, of exchange relations – ones which cross-cut other sorts of social structures, such as those of household, kinship, and so on.

A second occasion on which local people commonly turned to Nyabingi

³ Throughout my research on the Kanungu fire, respondents used the terms *okworekwa* (lit: a vision, a revelation) and *okubonekjerwa* (lit: an apparition) interchangeably. However, to avoid confusion, I use only *okworekwa* throughout this book.

was during times of (what might be termed) general misfortune. In this way, in the event of a large flood, or landslide, or famine (all of which have always been relatively common occurrences in these parts), or indeed during various sorts of political upheaval, local people, and especially those who regularly participated in the kinds of networks I have just described, would again take Nyabingi to be responsible. Thus, during such episodes, they would gather at a local Nyabingi shrine to seek her mollification (again, through the offices of one of her mediums), and at these meetings, a sacrifice would be made, in a ritual known as *okutamba*. Most importantly of all, at the end of these ceremonies the medium involved would effectively hand out, or in other ways redistribute, all of the animals and other goods, which she had previously received in payment for her consultations with the spirit (always, of course, in the name of Nyabingi herself). Moreover, these redistributions would start with those people who had been worst affected by the current misfortune. In these ways, then, these *okutamba* ceremonies generally *did*, in fact, at least partly negate the worst effects of the particular misfortune at hand.

The main point I want to make here, then, is that Nyabingi was never a bounded and coherent 'society', of the type imagined both by colonial officers and by others, but was instead always a diffuse set of informal, and in many ways ephemeral, exchange networks. Moreover, this reframing of Nyabingi's social form enables me to develop alternative readings of other of its aspects, and to arrive at different conclusions as to, for example, why it was so secretive, and as to what made it (apparently) so compelling as a mode of social action. In relation to the former of these characteristics, the very fact that Nyabingi was a network already goes some of the way to explaining its secrecy, given that many types of networks, by their very nature, tend towards concealment. One of the lasting contributions of the 'classic' anthropological networks studies of the 1960s was to show how in any field of multiple partial networks – a phrase which I think most anthropologists would now recognize describes practically any social context, and not just an urban one – individual actors always have multiple, and often quite contradictory, exchange obligations. In other words, because such actors are always 'drawn in several different directions at once', they are also highly likely, of necessity, to have to try to hide details of at least some of their transactions, from at least some of their multiple exchange partners (see, for example, Clyde Mitchell, 1969).

Perhaps more importantly, some theorists have suggested that this proclivity for secrecy may be particularly marked in those networks which are characterized by uneven exchanges – i.e. those in which recipients are passed goods of a higher value than they could possibly hope to reciprocate, at least in the short term (as was indeed the case with the kind of Nyabingi exchanges I have just described). As Albert Trouwborst showed, for example, in his seminal study of exchange networks in neighbouring Burundi (1973), these uneven networks are far more likely to lead to competitive forms of exchange behaviour – attempts at 'social mobility' and the like – and, as a result, are generally more given to suspicion, intrigue and concealment. Thus, in the first type of exchange network Trouwborst looked at, one

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