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Writing the East African Revival:

Jennifer Makumbi's *Kintu* in the Context of African Christian Historiography

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Abstract

Centring around a generational curse and the clan's recourse to the supernatural, the epic novel *Kintu* (2014) by the Ugandan writer Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi is a fascinating text for scholars of religion and literature. Praised for its mythological retelling of the history of the Buganda Kingdom and its people, a largely overlooked aspect of the novel is its critical commentary on Christianity, in particular the East African Revival (EAR)—an influential twentieth-century religious renewal movement. Positioning *Kintu*'s fictional account in the broader historiography of the EAR and recent reinterpretations of the movement, this article specifically examines the novel's concern with the transition from the Revival to Pentecostalism, and with the relationship between Christianity and indigenous religion and culture. It argues that whilst the novel persuasively evokes the textured lives of Revivalists to raise important considerations of Christianity's role in modern society, it overlooks aspects of the EAR's appeal as a critique of Baganda society.

Keywords

Uganda; East African Revival; Pentecostalism, Christianity; African literature

1. An East African epic

Kintu, the debut novel by the Ugandan writer Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, has received wide acclaim since its publication in 2014.[1] The book has received tributes, such as "the

[1] The book was first published by Kwani Trust in Kenya, with later editions by British and American publishers.

great Africanstein novel,"[2] and its significance and impact has been compared to a major classic text in African literature, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, as well as to the Ugandan classic, Okot P'bitek's *Song of Lawino*.[3] Spanning a period of over 250 years, and weaving into its narrative the myth, folktale, and history of the precolonial and modern Kingdom of Buganda, the novel has been dubbed "a reawakening of national identity, an icon that legitimises Ugandan cultural heritage."[4]

The book's title is inspired by the foundational myth of the Baganda[5], according to which Kintu was both the first human person and the first king of Buganda.[6] Makumbi has continued this retelling of Baganda mythology in her second novel, *The First Woman* (2021), which focuses on the wife of Kintu, Nyambi. Although these two texts can be read as a diptych, our discussion here focuses on the first novel, *Kintu*, which narrates the history of the Kintu "clan."[7] This history is a fatal one, as—in the novel's creative (re)imagination—it is defined by a curse running through the family's lineage dating back to the clan's founding father, Kintu Kidda, an eighteenth-century Ppookino (governor) of Buddu, a province of the ancient Buganda Kingdom. Structured in six books, *Kintu*'s first book narrates how this curse tragically entered the life of the clan, after Kintu Kidda unintentionally killed his adopted son, Kalema, and is subsequently cursed by the boy's biological father, Ntwire, who was a Tutsi from neighbouring Rwanda. The following five books (II–VI) are set in the contemporary period, each centring on a member of the Kintu clan in present-day Uganda, narrating how the curse continues to haunt them. The novel culminates in the clan's collective effort to break the curse—symbolically taking place during an Easter weekend—the effect of which remains unresolved.

The theme of the family curse puts *Kintu* in a tradition of African epic novels centring around the "curse and recourse to the supernatural."[8] Yet, the novel blends its magical realism with historical fiction, resulting in a text that is "an exercise of rehearsal and enactment of ghost archives, conjoining seemingly dissimilar conceptions of history."[9] Its historical account offers narrative insight into and commentary on the East African Revival

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[2] Namwali Serpell, "The Great Africanstein Novel," *The New York Review of Books*, 2017, https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/09/12/the-great-africanstein-novel-kintu/.

[3] Lesley Nneka Arimah Arimah, "Kintu by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi Review – Is This 'the Great Ugandan Novel'?," *The Guardian*, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/26/kintu-jennifer-nansubuga-makumbi-review.

[4] Goretti Kyomuhendo, "Goretti Kyomuhendo in Conversation with Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi," *Wasafiri* 33, no. 3 (2018): 39–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2018.1468403.

[5] The Baganda refers to an ethnic group that lives in Buganda, a traditional kingdom that currently exists within the Republic of Uganda, see https://buganda.or.ug. Their language is called Luganda.

[6] Deonte James Hollowell, "Kintu Myth Cycle," in *Encyclopedia of African Religion, Volume 1*, ed. Molefi K. Asante and Ama Mazama (SAGE, 2009).

[7] The novel portrays Kintu as (the founder of) a clan, which is at odds with the original myth in which the figure of Kintu is the founder of the Buganda Kingdom and thus is the "father" of the Baganda people as a whole (which consist of various clans).

[8] Mariam K. Deme, "The Supernatural in African Epic Traditions as a Reflection of the Religious Beliefs of African Societies," *Studies in World Christianity* 16, no. 1 (2010): 27–45. About magical realism, see Ato Quayson, "Magical Realism and the African Novel," in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, ed. Abiola Irele (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 159–76.

[9] Eugenia Ossana, "Epic Voices from Africa: Historical decolonial re-writings," *in The Routledge Companion to Literatures and Crisis*, ed. Silvia Pellicer-Ortín, Julia Kuznetski, and Chiara Battisti (Routledge, 2024), 356.

(EAR), an influential twentieth-century religious renewal movement in East Africa that has received little attention in literary texts and, until relatively recently, in scholarship. For this twofold reason, *Kintu* is an important text for anyone interested in religion in contemporary African literature, which is a field of growing scholarly interest.[10]

In this article, we specifically focus on the novel as a text of African Christian historiography, asking: How does Makumbi in *Kintu* write the history of the EAR? We begin by briefly outlining the scholarly context and methodological framing of our discussion, addressing the relationship between African literature and the historiography of African Christianity. The following sections then discuss the novel's representation of the Ugandan Christian landscape, specifically focusing on the main characters of Book III, Kanani Kintu and his wife, Faisi. We demonstrate how the novel captures a critical moment in the contemporary history of Ugandan Christianity, with the twentieth-century EAR stagnating, and its popularity and vitality being taken over by Pentecostal-Charismatic churches. Moreover, we pay close attention to the way in which Makumbi represents the relationship between the Revival and indigenous religion and culture, which offers insight into her perspective on the role of Christianity in postcolonial Uganda. Overall, we argue that Makumbi's representation of the EAR and of Pentecostalism is buttressed by her objective to highlight the intolerance of Christianity to indigenous religion. This explains why the novel prioritises these varieties of Christianity rather than those less aggressively opposed to Bagandan culture and spirituality. Moreover, we argue that whilst the novel persuasively evokes the textured lives of Revivalists to raise important considerations of Christianity's role in modern society, it overlooks certain aspects of the EAR's appeal as a critique of Baganda society.

2. African literature and African Christian historiography

The phenomenal growth and transformations of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa in the twentieth and twenty-first century have been widely documented by scholars in theology and religious studies, as well as in anthropology and history. As Elias Bongmba has argued, the study of "the history and dynamics of Christianity in Africa calls for an interdisciplinary approach."[11] However, one form of interdisciplinarity has largely been missing, which is literary studies, in particular African literary writings, as a lens for studying developments in African Christianities. Any engagement between literature and Christianity in Africa is mostly in the discourse of African theology, where classics from the 1960s such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *The River Between*, have been used to interrogate the colonial imposition and the gradual appropriation of Christian faith in local African contexts.[12] Yet, in this article, we are interested in a different kind of conversation, not

[10] Afe Adogame, "Religion in African Literary Writings," *Studies in World Christianity* 16, no. 1 (2010): 1–5; Adriaan van Klinken, "Religion in African Literature: Representation, Critique and Imagination," *Religion Compass* 14, no. 12 (2020): 1–12.

[11] Elias K. Bongmba, "Writing African Christianity: Perspectives from the History of the Historiography of African Christianity," *Religion and Theology* 23, no. 3–4 (2016): 289.

[12] For example, see Kwabena J. Asamoah-Gyadu, "'The Evil You Have Done Can Ruin the Whole Clan': African Cosmology, Community, and Christianity in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," *Studies in World Christianity* 16, no. 1 (2010): 46–62; Elias K. Bongmba, "On Love: Literary Images of a Phenomenology of Love in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*," *Literature and Theology* 15, no. 4 (2001): 373–95; Emmanuel Katongole, "Things Fall Apart: Christianity, Power, Violence, and Marginality", in *Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for*

between African theology but African Christian historiography and African literature. Methodologically speaking we ask: How and what do literary texts contribute to the writing of African Christian history? We explore this question with specific reference to *Kintu* which, as mentioned earlier, offers a creative literary account of an important chapter of Christianity in East Africa, that is, the EAR.

The distinct contribution of African literature to the study of religion, and specifically Christianity, in Africa has been argued to be three-fold: "first, a creative representation of African religious traditions and dynamics; second, an African critique of religious beliefs and institutions and third, the imagination of alternative religious possibilities in Africa."[13] In our reading of *Kintu* we are specifically concerned with the first of these contributions, representation, as we examine how the novel, as (at least partly) a text of historical fiction, represents the EAR. Yet, doing so, we acknowledge that the boundaries between these three contributions are fluid. Indeed, Makumbi herself has indicated that the novel also reflects a mode of critique, when she states in an interview that one of her objectives in writing *Kintu* was to address a "certain kind of Christianity":

> This type of Christianity is very intolerant of traditional religions, it is very entrepreneurial, money-making, and it is very predatory. I thought we needed to look at how Christianity arrived, how our grandfathers practised it, how our parents practised it, and what we are doing with it.[14]

The type of Christianity that Makumbi appears to be referring to here is not the EAR, but Pentecostal-Charismatic movements that have become highly popular in Uganda, and all over Africa, in recent decades and which are often associated with a neoliberal capitalist spirit of religious entrepreneurship.[15] Yet, the novel itself is equally critical of the earlier renewalist movement known as the EAR. Hence, the question how *Kintu* represents the continuities and discontinuities between these two generational movements becomes imperative in our discussion below. Moreover, given Makumbi's explicit mention in the above quotation of Christianity's intolerance towards Baganda indigenous religion and culture, the novel's attempt to address such intolerance, and to imagine alternative possibilities of religious worldmaking, will be a specific focus of the unfolding discussion.

Africa, 125–34 (Eerdmans, 2011). Also see Abraham Waigi Ng'ang'a, "African Theology and African Literature: Rediscovering a Daring Intellectual Project," *in Religion and Social Reconstruction in Africa*, ed. Elias K. Bongmba, 269–82 (Routledge, 2018); Jesse N.K. Mugambi, *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature* (East African Educational Publishers, 1992). A recent work on Christianity and African literary texts outside the discourse of African theology is Adriaan van Klinken, *Decolonizing Christianities in Contemporary Nigerian Literature* (Penn State University Press, 2025).

[13] Van Klinken, "Religion in African Literature," 2.

[14] https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2018/09/03/authors-in-the-west-dont-worry-about-whether-africa-will-understand-them-jennifer-nansubuga-makumbi-discusses-kintu-at-wits/

[15] For a concise introduction to African Pentecostalism, and the scholarly debates thereof, see Martin Lindhardt, "Introduction," in *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Postcolonial Societies*, ed. Martin Lindhardt (Brill, 2015), 1–53. Regarding Pentecostalism in Uganda more specifically, see Michael George Kizito, "When the Cross Hides the Flag: Postmodern Pentecostalism and the Fortification of Neo-liberal Capitalism in Uganda," *African Journal of Religion, Philosophy and Culture* 3, no. 1 (2022): 5–25.

Makumbi's view of the EAR as rigid, judgemental and admiring of past western missionary and colonial culture reflects the assumption of much scholarship at the turn of the twenty-first century, which largely ignored the revival and preferred to focus on movements that it considered religiously heterodox, ecclesiastically independent, culturally African, and politically engaged.[16] Africa's post-independence increase in Christian affiliation, and particularly the rise of new Pentecostal movements, challenged the usefulness of this schema. Some scholars began to examine the Revival in a new light, as a significant historical force in East Africa that raised important questions about society. Prominent among them is Derek Peterson's *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A history of Dissent, c. 1935-1972* which places Revivalists in historic debates about nationalism and ethnic identity. Peterson suggests that Revivalists critiqued the focus on ethnicity, kinship, and tradition as modern sources of identity and nation building that were being propounded by elite, often chiefly, men among the Baganda and other ethnic groups in the region. They presented, instead, an evangelical form of Christianity that encouraged education, personal discipline, and "fellowship" across ethnic groups as providing an appropriate moral framework with cosmopolitan networks and a global perspective.[17] Peterson's work has made an important contribution to the historiography of the EAR, revisiting earlier assumptions about and perceptions of the movement, and will serve as a contrast and counterpoint in our discussion of *Kintu*.

3. *Kintu*'s Landscape of Ugandan Christianity

Several scholars have pointed out that *Kintu* is not concerned with the history and legacy of European colonialism and mission. According to Jeanne-Marie Jackson, the novel represents "something genuinely momentous" in the body of modern African literature because "colonization is not its organizing principle."[18] Although its story spans a period of over 250 years, the opening part (Book I) is set in the mid-eighteenth century, at the time of the independent Kingdom of Buganda, while the later parts (Books II-VI) are set in the early twenty-first century, in the context of the modern Republic of Uganda (in which the Buganda Kingdom continues to exist). The colonial period is only mentioned in passing. A similar observation can be made about the novel's depiction of Christianity. The history of European missions in this part of Africa is briefly mentioned—for instance, one of the main characters, Miisi, is said to have been educated at an Irish Catholic mission school. However, missionary Christianity and its links to colonialism are not a central topic of concern. Christianity is embedded in the postcolonial Ugandan social landscape narrated in the novel, although a suspicion toward "the white man's religion" is reflected by some characters, while others romanticise the colonial past. "The alienation of Africans from their traditional cultures," which according to Simon Gikandi is central to African literary representations of

[16] Paul Kollman, "Classifying African Christianities: Past, Present and Future," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 40, no. 1 (2010): 3–32.

[17] See also, Emma Wild-Wood, "Evangelicalism: A Transnational Movement in East Africa During the 20th Century," in *Advancing Models of Mission: Evaluating the Past and Looking to the Future*, ed. by Kenneth Nehrbass, Aminta Arrington and Narry F. Santos (William Carey, 2021), 19–34.

[18] Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 111.

Christianity, is thematised through the characters of Kanani Kintu and his wife Faisi, whose zealous faith appears to be "the source of self-hate," thus reflecting the ongoing legacies of the epistemic violence of Christian mission.[19]

Through Kanani and Faisi, *Kintu* offers a literary representation of the EAR—a movement whose beginning is usually traced to a Rwandan mission station in 1929, from where it spread throughout colonial East Africa.[20] Although strongly linked to the Anglican Church, especially in Uganda, it also impacted on other Protestant denominations, such as the Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Methodist churches. Emma Wild-Wood observed in 2012 that the Revival has received relatively little attention in scholarship because it "does not fit neatly into the schema by which African Christianities have been measured": its evangelical zeal and its emphasis on religious conversion were seen as a continuation of the colonising role of Western mission, not meeting the scholarly interest in African authenticity and indigeneity.[21] Since then, several book-length studies of the Revival have been published, with scholars agreeing that the movement has greatly defined the history of Christianity in East Africa in the twentieth century, and that it presents a unique case of African agency in the local appropriation of Christianity as well as a particular vision of the moral economy of society distinct from traditionalism and nationalism.[22]

Earlier literary representations of the movement can be found in two novels by the late Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967).[23] In Ngũgĩ's words, in the early 1950s the Revival "swept through the ridges like a fire of vengeance." He describes it as an evangelical movement "of those Christians, irrespective of denomination, who had seen the light. By publicly confessing their sins, they became the saved ones."[24] Importantly, in both novels Ngũgĩ emphasises the a-political character of the Revival, put in sharp contrast to—and in conflict with—the Mau Mau rebellion against the British in Kenya at the time. This idea of the EAR existing "both outside of politics and the political imagination altogether" and as not constituting "anti-colonial political animus" has been cited as a main reason why it received little scholarly attention, but has recently been interrogated by Peterson's re-interpretation of the movement as part

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[19] Simon Gikandi, "Christianity and Christian Missions." In *The Routledge Encyclopedia of African Literature*, ed. Simon Gikandi (Routledge, 2009), https://www.proquest.com/encyclopedias-reference-works/christianity-christian-missions/docview/2137921490/se-2/.

[20] Kevin Ward, "Introduction," in *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*, ed. Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood (Ashgate 2012), 3–4.

[21] Emma Wild-Wood, "The East African Revival in the Study of African Christianity," in *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*, ed. Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood (Ashgate 2012), 202.

[22] For recent scholarship on the East African Revival, see Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood (eds.), *The East African Revival: History and Legacies* (Ashgate, 2012); Derek R. Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c.1935–1972* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Derek R. Peterson, "The East African Revival," *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume V: Global Anglicanism, c. 1910–2000*, ed. William L. Sachs (Oxford University Press, 2017), 211–31.; Jason Bruner, *Living Salvation in the East African Revival in Uganda* (University of Rochester Press, 2017); Daewon Moon, *African Initiative and Inspiration in the East African Revival* (Brill, 2022).

[23] In *Weep Not, Child*, the character of Isaka, a teacher, is depicted as a revivalist, while in *A Grain of Wheat*, it is Rev. Jackson Kigondu. About Ngũgĩ's own experience with the Revival, see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* (Vintage, 2011), 235–36. For a discussion of Ngũgĩ's representation of the movement, see Mugambi, *Critiques of Christianity*, 107–10.

[24] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat*, revised edition (Penguin, 2002), 82.

of a broader "history of dissent."[25] In comparison to Ngũgĩ's texts, Makumbi's account focuses not on the heyday but the decline of the Revival. It captures how, at the turn to the twenty-first century, Revivalist spirituality has become a spent force, represented by an overly devout elderly couple, perhaps the least sympathetic characters in the novel. It narrates how the movement is being subsumed by a new, but—according to Makumbi—possibly even worse, type of Christianity in the form of Pentecostalism. Yet, *Kintu*'s main Revivalist character, Kanani, fondly remembers and admires the past of British colonialism and European mission, which can be seen as an echo of Ngũgĩ's representation of revivalists, in the eyes of the Mau Mau, as "traitors."[26]

Both for Makumbi and Ngũgĩ, the apocalyptic beliefs, the emphasis on being saved, and the expression of a distinct way of life set the revivalists apart from other Christians, and indeed from society at large (practices which, according to Peterson, provided an alternative moral economy critiquing the emphasis on ethnicity, kinship, and tradition in the modern project of identity and nation building). As the narrator in *Kintu* observes: "For decades, the Awakened claimed to be the only people on the right course to heaven. They had declared other Anglicans Asleep, and Catholics were pronounced heathen for worshipping idols and a woman. Moslems were a primitive tribe" (162). The revivalists were committed to staying within the (Anglican) Church of Uganda, where the revival had first emerged, with the aim of transforming the church from inside.[27] Yet Makumbi's novel suggests that this project has stagnated in recent times, due to the emergence of a new form of revivalist Christianity, Pentecostalism, which has surpassed the "old" Revival in popularity and influence. The complex relationship between these two movements is made a narrative theme in *Kintu*, rendering the novel such a rich text for East African Christian historiography.

The narrator describes the Awakened as "an old sect within the Anglican Church," which was "based at Namirembe Cathedral" but with "churches all over central Uganda" (162). This description is a little confusing because it conflates two factions within the EAR. The phrase "old sect" appears to refer to the original Revival, popularly known as *Balokole*, a Luganda word meaning "the saved ones," which according to Kevin Ward reflects "the basic premise of revivalist teaching: the gift of salvation through faith in the Cross of Jesus Christ."[28] This movement had emerged in Uganda in the 1930s, with a strict evangelical ethos of holiness. In the 1970s, a group of dissenters had split themselves off the *Balokole*. Calling themselves *Bazukufu*, or "the re-Awakened," they believed that the Revival had compromised its original values, and they advocated a return to its evangelical zeal, considering themselves the true *Balokole*.[29] Makumbi appears to glance over these internal divisions: her use of the term "the Awakened" suggests that she is referring to the *Bazukufu*, but she associates this group with Namirembe Cathedral, where in fact the older *Balokole*

[25] Jason Bruner, "The East African Revival," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Christianity in Africa from Apostolic Times to the Present*, ed. Andrew Eugene Barnes and Toyin Falola (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 511; Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism*.
[26] Ngũgĩ, *A Grain of Wheat*, 84.
[27] Bruner, *Living Salvation*, 42.
[28] Ward, "Introduction," 4.
[29] Kevin Ward, "The Revival in an African Milieu," in *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*, ed. Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood (Ashgate, 2012), 190.

movement had a home. This imprecision does not affect the story, however, as *Kintu* is not concerned with the historic split within the Revival between *Balokole* and *Bazukufu*, but with the tensions between the Revivalists, or the Awakened as Makumbi calls them (and the term we will use here), and the Pentecostal-Charismatic churches that emerged in Uganda in the last decades of the twentieth century. We will return to this later, but we first pay a closer look at the novel's portrayal of the Awakened themselves.

4. A Model Awakened Couple

Book III of *Kintu*, set in the early 2000s—after about 70 years of Revival activity—yet with flashbacks to earlier decades, focuses on the main characters Kanani Kintu and his wife, Faisi, both in their 70s, who are known in their neighbourhood as "the Awakened couple" (159). Their children, however, have joined a Pentecostal church. The Revival, the text implies, is reaching its end, and the couple are among a dwindling number who refuse to see its decline. This is further indicated by comments from neighbours who, seeing the couple go preaching, ask: "Do the Awakened still exist?" (159) Thus, the novel offers a narrative illustration of the observation that "at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in some parts of East Africa, the Balokole movement is seen as a movement of the old, which is slowly giving way to newer forms of revivalism."[30] Of course, such a process is not without tensions, and the novel suggests that where initially, the Awakened contrasted themselves to other Christians in the mission churches whom they considered "asleep," they now increasingly contrast themselves to Pentecostals who claim to be born-again but do not meet the Awakened standards.

Kanani and Faisi are claimed to represent a "model Awakened couple" because they "lived a basic life" and wore "poverty like an ornament"; after paying their tithe (ten percent of their income) to the church, they "still spent most of their earnings on God's work" (162). With a few pen strokes, Makumbi captures the ascetic lifestyle of the Awakened. As Ward puts it, "the austerity of Balokole ethics [is] expressed in an inattention to fashion and a disdain for conspicuous consumption."[31] This is indeed a major contrast with later Pentecostal churches, reflecting a different hierarchy of ambitions and the use of time between the two. Jason Bruner, in his book-length study of the EAR, argues that being a member of the movement was not just a matter of *believing in* salvation, but of *living* salvation. That is, for the revivalists "salvation was primarily a lived experience," as "conversion created new habits, a new moral language, and new quotidian values and practices that shaped how revivalists interpreted and interacted with their world."[32] Revivalists criticised ethnic division and therefore avoided language that denoted clan or tribe, although they continued to use Ugandan languages in worship. Life within the EAR centred largely around fellowship groups where Revivalists would regularly meet for prayer, bible study, and confessions. Some scholars consider that the trans-ethnic community practices of the Revival fellowship meetings were adapted from aspects of African

[30] Ward, "Introduction," 6.
[31] Ward, "The Revival in an African Milieu," 196.
[32] Bruner, *Living Salvation*, 2, 18.

spirituality and culture.[33] Makumbi acknowledges the existence of such groups, suggesting that they replaced biological kinship relations. Yet, she simultaneously downplays their role and significance, when the narrator says that the Awakened "did not visit each other unnecessarily and they did not fuss over each other's children. The church was like a bus and brethren were passengers on their way to heaven rather than a family" (196). Indeed, Faisi and Kanani are depicted as a somewhat solitary couple, and nowhere in the novel do they attend a fellowship meeting; only after Kanani's sudden death, we read that "the Awakened had turned out in large numbers" to sing hymns and express their sympathy (392), and that they made the funeral arrangements. The couple appears to represent a radical revivalist position, which may reflect how some revivalists were perceived but does not entirely ring true for most of the movement.

The belief of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ instilled a strong evangelising drive to share the Gospel with others still living in "darkness." This drive was further reinforced by the Revival's eschatological belief in the imminent apocalypse. As the narrator in *Kintu* comments: "At the time, the Awakened believed that the world would end in less than a decade" (168-9). According to Emmanuel Twesigye, the Revivalists "preached God's impending apocalyptic judgement, and for doomsday divine destruction for the unrepentant."[34] Public preaching is what Kanani and, even more so, Faisi do, on buses and at markets, dedicating their lives to what they call "sowing the seed." Their characters are a narrative representation of the "ordinary revivalists" whose "intentional evangelistic efforts" were at the core of the spread of the Revival.[35] Makumbi combines this with another key feature of Revivalist spirituality, public confessions of specific sins. Although typically, such confessions were shared internally in the fellowship meetings of Revivalist Christians, in *Kintu*, they are performed externally as part of evangelising activities. The personal testimonies that Kanani and Faisi share at these occasions are fantastical exaggerations, drawing on a made-up sinful past—much to the embarrassment of their children. For instance, Faisi, in a hilarious scene on a bus where the beleaguered passengers have no choice but to listen to her preaching, depicts herself as "a slut" who slept with many married men and aborted three unborn babies, before she saw the light, got saved, married her current husband with whom she now serves God (164). In reality, however, Kanani is the only man she has been with in her entire life. Her testimonies illustrate the point that the confessions of revivalists "were often salacious and lewd," revealing the movement's concern with sexual morality.[36] For Faisi, depicting her pre-conversion life as darkly as possible is an evangelising tactic to bring home the message that "no sin is bigger than His mercy," if only one is truly repentant (165). Yet, doing so, she contravenes honesty and trustworthiness—some of the core moral principles of the Revival. Moreover, she only

[33] Moon, *African Initiative*; Emma Wild, "'Walking in the Light': The Liturgy of Fellowship in the Early Years of the East African Revival*,"* in *Studies in Church History, 35: Continuity and Change in Christian Worship,* ed. R.N. Swanson (Boydell, 1999), 419–31.

[34] Emmanuel K. Twesigye, *Religion, Politics and Cults in East Africa: God's Warriors and Mary's Saints* (Peter Lang, 2010), 74.

[35] Bruner, "The East African Revival," 505.

[36] Bruner, *Living Salvation*, 87.

confesses sin from a fictive, long foregone evil past, thus failing to attend to any misdemeanours in the present.

Despite their obvious commitment to the project of living salvation, Kanani and Faisi are not as flawless as one might expect from a "model Awakened couple." *Kintu* narratively brings home the point that conversion, and the subsequent quest for Christian holiness, remain work in progress, with considerable challenges. For the couple, these challenges are so profound that they cause a fundamental uncertainty about their place in heaven. The reason for this? Kanani and Faisi, according to the narrator, used to indulge sexually, "even after menopause; sometimes on Sundays as well" (167). This enjoyment of the flesh clearly conflicts with the ascetic lifestyle that the Awakened are supposed to lead. As the novel puts it, among the Awakened there was a belief that "to acquire a certain level of sanctity one had to abstain altogether. Sex was permissible for procreation, but to be avoided otherwise" (167). *Kintu*'s account of a battle against lust *within* marriage might not be representative of the predominant attitude towards sexuality in the Revival. Although the movement did have a strong concern with sexual purity, it did not consider marital sexual pleasure a taboo altogether, and it did not reduce marital sex to the purpose of procreation only.[37] Yet it is true that for Revivalists bodily discipline was an indication of salvation, as the body "was meant to display the life of salvation."[38] Subsequently, in the novel, the couple's dismal failure to control their desire for one another causes them existential doubt about their salvation, a position that is contrary to mainstream Revival teaching in which "rest[ing] in the finished work of Calvary" is encouraged.[39] Although they would pray for forgiveness each time, they "doubted that God would forgive a sin they had perpetuated through the decades" (168). Faisi takes the blame upon herself—claiming to be a "temptress"—while simultaneously blaming a demon for her weakness of the flesh. Despite Kanani's suggestion that he was equally to blame, Faisi maintains that "as a woman, the onus fell onto her to fight the good fight" (168), which reflects the age-old Christian idea of women being specifically tasked with upholding the ideal of purity, while their sexuality is simultaneously seen as seductive and dangerous.

Not only did Faisi and Kanani fail to discipline their own lust, they also failed to control their children's. This resulted in an even bigger shame in their family: incest between their twins, Job and Ruth. The house having no ceiling—the couple had opted for a cheap construction, because Jesus would come back soon anyway—, Kanani and Faisi's lust for each other "spilled over the walls" (169) and fatally inspired their children. Having always been very close—an "unhealthy relationship" (175)—, as teenagers the twins "still shared the same single iron bed" (177). When Ruth is found pregnant and gives birth to a son called Paulo, the acceptable version of the story—later told to Paulo—is that she was impregnated by a Tutsi water-man called Kalemanzira, whose name and origin remind the

[37] According to Kevin Ward, "individual Awakened (*Bazukufu*) might have decided not to have sexual relations even within marriage … [but] Revivalists in general have never expressed contempt for sexual relations within marriage, and they have not been exercised by (Catholic) teaching about the intention to produce children being important for every single sexual act within marriage" (personal email correspondence, 4 June 2021).
[38] Bruner, *Living Salvation*, 67.
[39] Yusto Kaahwa, Solomon Nkesiga and Joan Hall, *The East African Revival: Overview* (East Africa Revival Fellowship, 2012), 16.

reader of the curse coming into the Kintu clan at the beginning of the novel after Kalema's tragic death. Kanani and Faisi know better. For them, the incestuous pregnancy is a sign of the Devil at work in their family (183), which for Kanani is closely connected to the generational curse in his lineage (161, 379). Years later, the image of his grandson still blocks Kanani's ability to pray, making him wonder why his faith in Christ had failed to protect his family from the curse (161).

As discussed above, Makumbi's depiction of Kanani and Faisi as a model Awakened couple includes some details–such as their solitary appearance, their public confession of intimate sin, and their battle against lust *within* marriage–that can be seen as historical inaccuracies. However, these "misrepresentations" can also be seen as serving a satirical purpose and thus having a critical function, reflecting a tradition in African literature of using humour to critique religion.[40]

5. The Pentecostal Challenge

The emergence of Pentecostalism in the last decades of the twentieth century has been claimed to pose "the biggest threat to the continuation of the East African Revival as the leading edge of Protestant spirituality," especially because of their appeal to the young and educated.[41] Indeed, *Kintu* acknowledges this threat, with the narrator observing that, "Since the arrival of the deafening and predatory Pentecostal churches in America from the '80s, the Awakened had become an endangered species. The Pentecostals had drowned them with their discotheque music, frenzied dancing and ecstatic prayer" (162). In *Kintu* the growing popularity of Pentecostalism causes tensions among the Awakened. While the leadership decided to "withdraw from towns and cities to go into the hills" (162), Kanani and Faisi stayed within the city out of the conviction that "the world needs our true witness now in the age of false witness more than ever" (163).[42] Yet, the couple's effort in "sowing the seed" appears to have little success.

The irony is that because of their decision to stay in the city, Kanani and Faisi's own children discover charismatic worship and start attending a Pentecostal church. One Wednesday afternoon in the year 1968, while their mother is busy "sowing," the eleven-year-old twins accidentally encounter a new church. They both gape at "grown men and women singing, clapping and dancing," and are shocked by a service with lots of music and without a sermon (179). Yet despite their initial shock, they return weekly, unbeknown to their parents. Soon they find themselves participating in the ecstatic, embodied, and emotional worship that was so different from the sober, stifling Anglican liturgy they were accustomed to. The time-setting of this part of the story corresponds with the historical record according to which the first Pentecostal-Charismatic churches begun to emerge in Uganda in the 1960s.[43] The church in question is referred to in the novel as "Guggudde's

[40] Rebekah Cumpsty, "History, Humour and Spirituality in Contemporary Nigeria: An Interview with Okey Ndibe," *Wasafiri* 36, no. 1 (2021): 25-31.

[41] Ward, "Introduction," 6; also see Amos Kasibante, "Revival and Pentecostalism in My Life," in *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*, ed. Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood (Ashgate, 2012), 61–69.

[42] According to Kevin Ward, the suggestion that the movement withdrew to the rural areas is ahistorical as the EAR "remained strong in urban centres" (personal correspondence, 2 October 2025).

[43] Paddy Musana, *The Pentecostal Movement in Uganda* (Makerere University Press, 2025), 77-79.

Mungu ni Mwema Church." *Mungu ni Mwema* is Swahili for "God is good," the title of a gospel song popular in East and Central Africa.[44] "Guggudde" was a nickname of the first Pentecostal church in Uganda, Makerere Full Gospel Church, established in 1960, and named that way because of its frequent singing of another popular gospel song, in Luganda, with the refrain "*Gugudde, gugudde, gugudde, Omugugu owebibi gugudde*" ("Fallen, fallen, fallen, the burden of sin is fallen").[45] As much as the lyrics on rejecting sin and being born again might indicate a continuity between Pentecostalism and the older Revival, there is in fact a fundamental difference: in Pentecostalism, sin is mostly seen as a burden of the past, the liberation of which is to be celebrated victoriously, while in Revivalist spirituality the perpetual focus on Christ paying the price of sin on the cross prompts a struggle to "deny oneself… crucifying the flesh" in daily Christian life.[46] This is reflected in the novel's narrative contrast between these two religious cultures: the emotionally and physically controlled and collectively expressed worship of the Revival versus the noisy abandonment and howling of Pentecostal worship that allows for individual expression in a shared space.

According to the narrator, the Wednesday of their first visit to this church marks the moment when the Devil arrived and "camped in the twins' world" (178). This suggestion, that Pentecostalism—from the viewpoint of Kanani and Faisi—is linked to the work of the Devil, plays out at different levels in the story. First, the novel suggests that the twins' committing of incest is somehow connected to them being drawn to Pentecostal worship. Both incidents are narrated in the same chapter, happen in secrecy and against their parents' authority, and are explicitly linked to the Devil. Second, when the twins at adult age still attend a Pentecostal church, the novel explicitly implies that they are only pseudo-Christians. This is narrated through the eyes of their son, Paulo, who observes:

> The twins' Christianity only went as far as turning up for service on Sunday. Unlike other Christians, they never talked about their love for God, or witnessed about the wonders Christ had done for them; they have never asked him to get saved and he had never seen them pray outside the church. (211)

Although the novel does not explicitly indicate that this pseudo-faith is characteristic of Pentecostals in general, its suggestion that the appeal of Pentecostalism is in its "discotheque music, frenzied dancing and ecstatic prayer" (162) implies that this new revival movement might be more about religious entertainment than about deep, genuine faith. Certainly, the novel reflects the "great suspicion of Pentecostals" and their shallowness among the members of the old Revival.[47] This suspicion is expressed in a Revivalist booklet published in 2012 that explicitly critiques Pentecostalism for downplaying "the disciplines

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[44] https://www.musicthatmakescommunity.org/mungi_ni_mwema.

[45] Musana, *The Pentecostal Movement in Uganda*, 78; also see Brian Mutebi, "The story of the first Pentecostal church in Uganda," *Daily Monitor*, 21 September 2012, https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/lifestyle/religion/the-story-of-the-first-pentecostal-church-in-uganda-1526150 (accessed 8 August 2025). About Makerere Full Gospel Church, see https://makererefullgospel.org/history/. Interestingly, the church today runs a Christian television station called Gugudde TV.

[46] Kaahwa, Nkesiga and Hall, *The East African Revival,* 8.

[47] Ward, "The Revival in an African Milieu," 196.

and practices for victorious living" and for promoting "loud music, fame, wealth, and power."[48] Thirdly, the twins' joining a Pentecostal church exemplifies the failure of the old Revival to cultivate a new generation of devoted Christians and to remain a relevant and influential factor in Ugandan Christianity. When Kanani at the age of 74 is forced to retire from his job at Namirembe Cathedral, the novel states that the Awakened lose their "last hold" onto the Cathedral, because "there were no young Awakened in the church anymore. Most of the children of the Awakened, like the twins, had deserted the sect for the new Christianity" (204).[49] Kanani and Faisi believe that the Church of Uganda, which the Revivalists had sought to reform, "was now in the hands of the Asleep" (ibid). In other words, their hard labour of bringing renewal in the church had proven, in the end, to be futile, and the Devil appears to have triumphed. On the same page, the novel narrates how Ruth and Job, now adults, attend the Redeemed Gospel Church on Sir Apollo Kaggwa Rd.[50] The location of this church is significant: on a major road named after the first prime minister of Uganda (who was a member of the Church of Uganda), leading into Kampala's central business district, near Makerere University, parliamentary buildings and major international hotels. In the narrative geography of the novel, it indicates that Pentecostalism has become a major force in present-day Uganda. Yet, Ruth's lukewarm participation in the life of this church has none of the zeal of her austere parents, suggesting that Pentecostalism's establishment risks the movement becoming spiritually "asleep" and powerless.

Makumbi's narrative frame that associates Pentecostalism with the Devil is particularly interesting considering the view of some scholars that in the EAR, Satan was seen "more as a personification of evil than a real being," while one of the innovations of Pentecostalism is that it identifies the ancestors, spirits and gods of indigenous religions with the biblical characters of Satan and of demons.[51] Against this background, Makumbi's remapping of Pentecostalism as the Devil can be seen as an "un-translation" of Pentecostalism's previous move of translating the indigenous spirit world into the New Testament's language of demonology. However, this narrative frame might be too unsubtle to capture the "uneasy relationship" between the old Balokole Revival, and the new Pentecostal one.[52] After all, scholars have identified several similarities and continuities between the two movements.[53] Yet there is perhaps more rupture than continuity, or so *Kintu* suggests. Where the Revivalists were committed to staying in the Church of Uganda, Pentecostals separated themselves from it. Furthermore, the ascetic-evangelical spirituality of the Revival is very different from the ecstatic charismatic spirituality of Pentecostalism.

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[48] Kaahwa, Nkesiga and Hall, *The East African Revival*, 17.

[49] In fact, Namirembe Cathedral still has two "East African Re-Awakened Fellowship" meetings a week. It also has two "Deliverance" events, suggesting that the Anglican Cathedral accepts both expressions of Christianity, https://namirembecathedral.org/services/ (accessed 25 August 2025).

[50] There is no Redeemed Gospel Church on Sir Apollo Kaggwa Road, yet Makerere Full Gospel Church is located here. There are Redeemed Gospel Churches in other parts of Kampala.

[51] Kasibante, "Revival and Pentecostalism in My Life," 68; Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999); Allan H. Anderson, *Spirit-filled World: Religious Dis/continuity in African Pentecostalism* (Springer, 2018).

[52] Ward, "The Revival in an African Milieu," 197.

[53] Kasibante, "Revival and Pentecostalism in My Life"; Ward, "The Revival in an African Milieu," 196–99.

Makumbi's theme of demonisation reflects the strong sense of disillusionment among the Awakened, who witness the demise of their own revival and the rise of a movement they view with great suspicion. Moreover, as we will see below, the narrative emphasis on the Devil aligns with *Kintu*'s overall theme of the curse.

6. Breaking with the Past yet Fearing the Curse

The Awakened were expected to make a "complete break" with traditional Ugandan culture, especially indigenous religious practices that were seen as "inherently sinful."[54] *Kintu* comments that revivalists had "shaken off most of Ugandan culture," apart from gender roles: cooking, among other domestic chores, continued to be considered "unmanly" in line with traditional views (170). Exemplifying this break with the past is the role that twins play in Book 3. The twins do not simply represent a close sibling relationship. Twins are a narrative thread throughout *Kintu* because, in Ganda culture, twins have power connected to their representation of the fundamentally relational understanding of the self-in-others.[55] In Book 1, Kintu Kidda's decision—against cultural expectation—to take a younger twin as his first wife is pivotal to the curse coming into the lineage. The spirit of the same Nnakato plays a central role in the attempt to break the curse at the end of the novel. Suubi the protagonist of Book II, is also called Nnakato. Her older twin sister, Babyire, has died and comes to haunt her. In Book 3, Kanani and Faisi as Revivalists, had refused to acknowledge their children with the names Wasswa (male first born) and Nnakato (female second born), as was custom for twins, but had opted only for the biblical names Job and Ruth. Likewise, they refused to perform the traditional rituals associated with twins and to carry the traditional names for the parents of twins, Ssalongo and Nnalongo, "for that would be courting the Devil" (174). This narratively illustrates the Revivalists' "shunning of nearly any cultural practice that might be thought of as 'traditional'."[56] Yet in the twins' incest, Makumbi suggests that failure to observe clan traditions does not irradicate the curse. Indeed, it makes its visitation more shameful. The rejection of Ugandan traditions by Kanani and Fasi is paralleled by their idealisation of the colonial past, when the "magical hands of the British" brought order and put Uganda "on its way to civilisation," until independence came (159–60). As such, Makumbi depicts the couple as colonised minds for whom Christian faith implies a dissociation from Ugandan culture and religion, although in Peterson's alternative interpretation it could be seen as part of a "cosmopolitan vision."

Nevertheless, when Ruth falls pregnant her mother decides that she should be sent away to Kanani's "heathen" cousin, Bweeza, who had refused to be confirmed in church, respects traditional customs, and is in a polygamous marriage. Faisi refuses to accompany her husband and daughter, as she considers her in-law's home as "the Devil's lair" (183), while Kanani refuses to take a seat and receive any refreshments at the house of his cousin, as it would be "like shaking a leper's hand" (185). The couple embodies the demonisation of traditional religion and culture, and the break with relatives still living "in darkness," that was typical of the Revival. The fact that they leave their teenage daughter in the care of a

[54] Bruner, *Living Salvation*, 7.
[55] For a wider discussion on twins see, Philip M. Peek (ed) *Twins in African and Diaspora Cultures: Double Trouble, Twice Blessed* (Indiana University Press, 2011).
[56] Bruner, "The East African Revival," 509.

"heathen" illustrates the level of shame they felt about her pregnancy. Bweeza, in her turn, while observing Kanani's eyes scanning the walls of her home for "signs of heathenry" (187), muses that "Christianity messed up with the mind: how else would she explain Kanani who had frozen all his humanity to turn into a walking Bible?" (188). Through the narrative depiction of the complex relationship between the two cousins, Makumbi delivers her objective, to address the intolerance of Christianity to indigenous religion. To drive that point home, she depicts her characters as particularly staunch and intolerant, even for Revivalists. Other Anglicans, and certainly most Catholics in Uganda, would not behave in the same way as Kanani and Faisi, even though the tension between Christianity and indigenous religion is an issue among Ugandan Christians generally.

Kanani's wish to break with Ugandan traditions was not only informed by the general intolerance of the Awakened towards indigenous religion and culture. More fundamentally, it was informed by his awareness of the curse running through his family lineage, which he believed—or at least, hoped—to keep safe from through his Christian faith. The approach of the Revival to the supernatural world, according to Amos Kasibante, was to "demythologize" such beliefs, while Ward speaks about "the Balokole indifference to the traditional spirit world."[57] As part of their conversion, revivalist Christians were supposed to denounce witchcraft and to burn the material objects, such as fetishes and charms, associated with what was now deemed to be "an impotent spiritual economy focused on the past."[58] However, ordinary revivalists may have struggled to adopt the demythologised worldview that the Revival preached. Breaking with the past, for them, was often more an aspiration than an end reached, as reflected in many of their confessions about secretly using indigenous sacred objects. This is reflected in the character of Kanani, for whom the spiritual curse in his family is not something about which he can be indifferent, as he acknowledges its potency. In fact, associating the curse to the work of the devil is a way for him to render its power real, even if this goes against the Revival's aforementioned demythologised view of Satan. His father and grandfather "had been confident that if the family remained steadfast in the Church and kept their faith they would be safe" (161), but Kanani frequently doubts whether they were right. As much as he wants to believe that "the curse was nothing but the work of the Devil and Jesus had trounced all evil at Golgotha," he struggles to convince himself (161). He even wonders whether God might have "withdrawn his protection" against the curse from his family (219). Given that incest is one of the symptoms associated with the curse, his grandson Paulo is a daily reminder of its threat. When Kanani comes to fetch his daughter, Ruth, and his illegitimate new-born grandson, Paulo, from his "heathen" cousin, Bweeza, the latter tells him: "You might think that because you are a Christian the curse will not touch you, but I am telling you this child is not a coincidence. Ignore him and you'll pay dearly" (199). Years later, when a grown-up Paulo decides to adopt Kalema[59] as his surname, Kanani is upset because that

[57] Kasibante, "Revival and Pentecostalism in My Life," 68; Ward, "The Revival in an African Milieu," 198.
[58] Bruner, *Living Salvation*, 34.
[59] Paulo initially chose the name Kalemanzira, after his grandfather told him that his biological father was a Rwandan waterman who had become "too friendly" with his mother (207). However, when his grandfather discovers this name change and is upset by it, Paulo "insisted on being called Kalema if Kalemanzira was too much for his family" (208).

name is “too close to the curse” (161). The curse, after all, had been placed two centuries earlier after the fatal death of a boy called Kalema. When the Kintu clan gathers in a joint attempt to break the family curse, Kanani decides to take his grandson with him, possibly out of the belief that Paulo “was the curse” (379).

Curses can be described as “any attempt to use an invocation to cause harm to someone.”[60] The belief in curses, which is widespread in African cultures, reflects the notion that “there is mystical power in words,” and is thus part of a broader religious worldview in which the human realm is enchanted.[61] Book I of *Kintu* narrates how the curse came into being more than two centuries ago. It was invoked by Ntwire, after the death of his son, Kalema by the hand of Kintu, with the former declaring to the latter: “To you, to your house and to those that will be born out of it—to live will be to suffer. You will endure so much that you’ll wish that you were never born. … And for you Kintu, even death will not bring relief” (50). Only a few years later, the curse takes Kintu’s son and successor, Baale, as victim, after which Kintu’s beloved wife, Nnakato, commits suicide. Kintu himself disappears, getting “neither a grave nor funeral rites” (81), although his restless spirit is believed to be protecting his descendants.

Within *Kintu*’s fictional world, the curse was invoked in the eighteenth century but continues to hold power. The novel opens with a prologue, set in 2004, which narrates the killing of Kamu, a descendent of Kintu and Miisi’s son, who was mistaken for a thief and subsequently beaten and stoned to death by an angry crowd. As mentioned earlier, Books II-V each focus on another contemporary descendant of the legendary Kintu, narrating how their lives continue to be haunted by the curse, manifesting itself through misfortune, mental illness, disease, and sudden death. As we have seen, even Kanani who, like his father and grandfather, has sought protection in the Christian faith, and who as an Awakened is supposed to have broken with “superstitious” beliefs, fears the curse and its impact on his family. It demonstrates the deep-rooted belief in ancestral relationships and in the notion that failure to keep ancestral covenant leads to misfortune: a conviction that cannot be entirely removed by adopting another set of beliefs.

7. Good Friday, Easter, and the Unbroken Curse

The epic story culminates in Book VI of the novel, titled “The Homecoming.” It narrates how hundreds of members of the Kintu clan, connected by patrilineal lines, come together in their home village Kiyiika, where once Kintu lived, during the Easter weekend in 2004. Although described as a family reunion, the gathering is intended to be a collective attempt to break the curse. Organised by the clan elders, including Miisi, Kanani had initially declined the invitation—after all, he had cut all ties with his relatives, but more importantly, “he was not keen on a head-on collision with the family curse” (219). Yet his wife persuades him to attend, saying that as “God’s chosen,” he should use the event as an opportunity to preach to the “multitude of relations hungering for salvation” (219). However, only a very few attend his prayer meetings, and Kanani’s evangelising zeal becomes the subject of ridicule.

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[60] Molefi K. Asante, “Curse,” in *Encyclopedia of African Religion, Volume 1*, ed. Molefi K. Asante and Ama Mazama (SAGE, 2009), 188.

[61] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Heinemann, 1989), 192.

From Kanani's perspective the family gathering is reminiscent of the biblical story about the prophet Elijah in confrontation with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:20-40). Kanani is gearing up for what he sees as "the biggest crusade of his life" where he will clash "with the Devil in his clan" in an attempt to get his relatives out of their "deep spiritual jungle" (346-347). Yet where Elijah is successful in defeating his opponents, Kanani's success is far from obvious. To begin with, he himself feels that "the fire that once burned in him" has been fading away (219-220). At the gathering, he is overwhelmed by fatigue and he misses Faisi, "his indefatigable fighter" (346). His preaching is not well received, and he ends up having tense arguments with his cousins Bweeza and Miisi. Critically, his confidence in his ability to "dismantle the curse and crash the Devil" (350) receives a serious blow when, in the process, the biggest secret of his family—that his grandson Paulo is born out of incest—comes to light. The confession that Paulo is "the kind of child our culture calls *mawemuko*" (375) must have shamed him, and the day after his return home Kanani dies from heart failure.[62]

Kanani's death is not the only tragic incident following the family reunion. His relative, Isaac, has a car accident on the way back from Kiyiika, while his fellow clan elder, Miisi, loses his mind and ends up hovering "in the middle world between sanity and insanity" (409). At the reunion itself, during the ritual to break the curse, another descendant of Kintu, Suubi, becomes possessed by the spirit of her deceased twin sister, and breaks four fingers and both wrists in the process. The spirit medium, named Muganda, who presided over the ritual—which involved a reburial of the bodies of Kintu, his first wife, Nnakato, and their adopted son, Kalema—nearly dies in the aftermath of the ceremony, when on Easter Monday he is attacked by the spirit of Ntwire (Kalema's Tutsi father (372). With all this unfolding tragedy, the novel leaves open the question whether the clan's attempt to break the curse was successful. An optimistic reading sticks with the words of the spirit medium, according to whom the dramatic incidents are the "death throes" through which the curse wreaks havoc in the process of being broken (371). Isaac confirms this reading later, saying: "Ntwire was leaving, but he was not going empty-handed" (395). But these words are uttered before Isaac has his car accident, and before we learn that Miisi has lost his sanity. In the final pages of the novel, we read that Miisi, having lost his mind, believes that he "is the lamb, the chosen one" carrying all the clan's curses on his head (407). These words can be read as suggesting that the curse is not broken, but is concentrated on Miisi who is sacrificed on behalf of the clan, like the six lambs earlier in the story in a scene that Miisi himself linked to the Old Testament (363). Miisi, then, becomes a kind of messianic figure modelled after Jesus Christ who, according to the New Testament, redeemed humankind from the curse of the law by becoming a curse himself (Galatians 3:13).

The themes of curse, deliverance, and sacrifice are given further biblical salience by the temporal setting of the family gathering over the Easter weekend. What does it mean that the confrontation between Kanani and Miisi takes place during Good Friday, a

[62] *Mawemuko* implies a child of an incestuous union. According to Kevin Ward, the word probably derives from the Luganda adjective -*wemu*, meaning "shameful, disgraceful, beyond all accepted norms" (personal correspondence, 2 October 2025).

confrontation that according to Kanani is a clash with "the Devil in his clan" (346) but which he does not convincingly win? What does it mean that the reburial of Kintu, Nnakato, and Kalema takes place on Easter Sunday, their bodies put to rest in order to appease their spirits yet with Suubi at that very moment being attacked by the angry spirit of her twin? What does it mean that, on Easter Monday, the spirit medium himself is attacked by the spirit of Ntwire, who had first invoked the curse? It has been argued that this framing of the novel's most critical events reveals "the crypto-paschal dénouement of the tale,"[63] yet it is not clear what Makumbi's intention is with this. In the biblical (Pauline) account of Easter, Jesus Christ dies on the cross, carrying the curse of humankind to bring reconciliation with God, and Christ's resurrection is the sign that God has accepted this sacrifice and has redeemed the curse that afflicted humankind since the Fall. But Makumbi's invocation of this theme is more ambiguous and open-ended. The breaking of the curse remains, at best, a promise or a hope. While awaiting this promise to materialise the Kintu clan is called "to keep an eye on each other and hold each other up," embarking together "on the journey of healing" (370-171). Yet perhaps, this is not so different from the biblical account of Easter after all, because here, too, the curse continues to wreak havoc in its death throes until it will finally be overcome.

The Easter-timing of the family gathering can possibly be seen as a narrative provocation by Makumbi, as she uses the most sacred holiday in the Christian calendar to stage an alternative form of redemption and reconciliation—one that is not universal but kin-oriented, and one that draws on the beliefs and rituals of Baganda indigenous religion. Kanani's dramatic failure to preach at the gathering, his fear for the curse as a demonic threat, and his subsequent death, appear to suggest that Christian faith is unable to overcome curses from the past. Whatever redemption Christ accomplished through the crucifixion and resurrection, it cannot redeem the Kintu clan. Perhaps, the novel even suggests that Christianity itself might be a curse—after all, Miisi links it to the Hamitic curse which has been used in Western Christianity to justify colonialism in Africa and the enslavement of black people. Through the characters of Kanani and Faisi, Makumbi depicts Christianity as an ongoing colonisation of the mind, reinforcing the notion of Christianity as a dangerous external force, alien to Baganda identity and culture.

8. Conclusion

Through the characters of the elderly "awakened" couple, Kanani and Faisi, Makumbi's novel *Kintu* presents Revivalist Christianity in Uganda as odd, out of touch, hostile, and occasionally comedic. It is largely a spent force, but one that has paved the way for a more virulent form of Christianity that is increasingly part of everyday life in Uganda (as elsewhere in Africa): Pentecostalism. The detailed portrayal of the couple and the character development of Kanani allows for an effective comparison with the other characters in the novel who are more sympathetic because they are less sure of their rectitude. With their ascetic values and discipline, Kanani and Faisi are entirely plausible as Revivalists committed to convincing those around them of their distinct vision of society, even if the portrayal of

[63] Russell West-Pavlov, "Proximate Historiographies in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu*," *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde* 58, no. 1 (2021): 79.

their way of living as Revivalists is sometimes exaggerated and does not always conform to the mainstream teachings of the movement. Mukumbi ably historicises Pentecostalism and presents a reasonable interpretation of its development, as a second-generation, indirect product of the EAR, which prepared the ground for Pentecostalism by its disassociation from traditional spiritual practices, its global outlook and its past societal influence. While it is not her main theme, Mukumbi effectively represents the continuities and discontinuities of these two significant movements in East African Christianity.

The past prominence of Revivalists during the twentieth century, and the rise of Pentecostalism in the twenty-first century, provide Mukumbi with historical movements with which to critique types of Christianity that are intolerant of Baganda culture and spirituality. In this novel she rarely addresses the less aggressive forms of Anglicanism and Catholicism that form the backdrop to her second novel, *The First Woman*, and which have often supported theological thought that contextualises or inculturates Christianity. Revivalism and Pentecostalism work well as foils for her exploration of modern responses to an enduring world of curses, spirits, ancestors, and kin-networks that both plague and sustain her characters. However, Mukumbi cannot also examine the themes that have interested recent scholars of East African Christian history. The stark critique of ethnic difference that was a prominent feature of the Revival at its height, cannot be part of a story that centres upon clan loyalties among the Baganda. Makumbi's purview is modern Buganda and the vitality of its cultural legacy. The strong female character of Bweeza shows the complexities of its patriarchal nature and celebrates its rich kin connections. Revivalists and Pentecostalists, on the other hand, want to engage East Africa and the world. Makumbi seems to suggest that the rejection of Buganda particularity comes at a grave cost.

To conclude, let us return to the more general question asked earlier in this article: How and what do literary texts contribute to the writing of African Christian history? From our discussion of *Kintu* it appears that the contribution of literary texts, even if they are presented as historical fiction, is not necessarily in historical accuracy, but in a combination of creative representation, historical contextualisation, and socio-religious critique. That is why the conversation between African Christian historiography and African literature is so productive and stimulating. *Kintu* certainly demonstrates the important capacity of literary writing to empathetically and critically understand Christianity in African life-worlds. By doing so, the novel also explores and illuminates critical historical and questions, such as the relationship between Christianity and indigenous religions, and the relationship between the EAR and Pentecostalism. Makumbi's *Kintu* offers a narrative commentary on these questions that not only reflects but also shapes the historiography of East African Christianity and the public memory of a highly influential twentieth-century religious renewal movement.

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