BOOK REVIEW


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This volume on the role of spirits and the Holy Spirit in migrant mobilities brings together recent scholarship connecting the fields of the anthropology of transnationalism with the anthropology of religion. The editors have consciously chosen a demarcation of the subject area of this book that challenges the distinction between spirit centered practices, usually associated with so called “traditional” or localized religion, and Pentecostal Christianity, the ubiquitous example of a global religion consisting of highly “portable” religious practices. As many of the chapters show, spirit centered practices are equally portable, and equally important in establishing and negotiating transnational networks and fields.

Four interrelated fields are explored as constitutive of transnational religious networks: 1) mobile spirits and portable practice, 2) media and mediation, 3) money and markets, 4) religious place making and spatial politics (p. 2). All of the chapters represent quite interesting ethnographies, which are in many cases also used to outline quite original theoretical arguments.

Chapter 1, by Michael Lambek, outlines how movement and travel are often part of the very nature of spirits even when the people to which they are connected stay in one place. Chapter 2, by Drotbohm, shows how persistent the connection with the spirits of Haitian Vodou can be through outlining the biography of a man who attempted to break his connections through migration. In this way, she shows how the ethics of transnational family life are manipulated by the family that stays behind, through spiritual “attacks” and forces the recipient of these attacks to return to Vodou in order to be able to negotiate these attacks and the claims and ties behind them. Chapter 3, by Fjelstad, shows how a transnational religious field of Vietnamese spirit mediums has emerged through contacts between Vietnamese spirit mediums in the US and the spirit mediums in Vietnam, which are once again able to practise after a period of suppression. She also describes the interesting cultural differences between the spirits in Vietnam and the US, such as their different attitudes towards money: whereas the Vietnamese-based spirits are unembarrassed in discussing money, the American-based spirits seem to have a more reticent attitude towards the subject.
The first chapter explicitly dealing with Pentecostalism is chapter 4, in which Daswani describes the role of the Holy Spirit as a resource for removing obstacles to travel and mobility, converting the desire for transnational mobility into reality. He shows how Ghanaian Pentecostal prophets frame and facilitate travel. Interestingly, their credibility in calling on the Holy Spirit to remove obstacles to travel does not depend on their own mobility.

The only chapter (5) explicitly discussing the role of media is that of Marleen de Witte, and interestingly she does this for three cases: Ghanaian Pentecostalism, the “neotraditional” Ghanaian movement Afrikania, and traditional spiritual practices in Ghana. For each of these cases, she discusses the role of visual mediation, transnational mobility and the spiritual in relation to the “nexus of publicity and secrecy” (p. 83) produced by religious media. Incidentally, she shows that although the Holy Spirit can conceptually be argued to be everywhere, it still always needs to be mediated in specific ways.

Like chapter 5, chapter 6 addresses not only the topic of the book itself (the mobility of spirits) but also other discussions dominating the study of Pentecostalism quite fruitfully. In this case it is the notion of “migrant churches” as a home away from home and the (Marxist-originated) paradigm that analyses Pentecostalism in terms of a discontent with modernity. In contrast, Van Dijk shows through his research among Pentecostal Ghanaian entrepreneurs in Botswana how Pentecostal networks “catapult” new migrants into entrepreneurship. Within these networks, there is a strong ethic that only those who will help themselves will be helped. Individuals who do not strive hard enough to be successful entrepreneurs are socially excluded, and said to be “lacking in faith.” In this way he identifies an “ethic within an ethic”: the Ghanaian ethic of success within the Protestant ethic identified by Weber by which the fruits of one’s labour are seen as signs of divine grace. Although one might criticize this latter discussion (the role of the belief in predestination is largely absent in Pentecostalism), Van Dijk makes an important point: this type of Pentecostalism is not just a safe haven or a way of “coping,” but strongly activating and uncomfortable to those who do not wish to put success before everything else.

Chapter 7 also addresses market forces, but in a different way: the religious commodification in so-called Four Palace medium ship in Vietnam. Endres argues that an ethnographic approach to the economics of religion shows quite clearly the shortcomings of rational choice theories, especially in the way this approach creates artificial divisions between “suppliers” and “consumers,” rather than examining the complex relationships and dynamics that propel religious change in Vietnam in the context of transnational and global flows.

The last four chapters (8-11) all deal with the theme of place making and spatial politics, and all do so in relation to Christianity, three of them specifically relating to Pentecostalism. Chapter 8, by Hüwelmeier, describes the ways in which Pentecostalism facilitates connections between different groups of Vietnamese migrants and Vietnam, the new cultural spaces and mobilities that are generated in this way. Garbin, in chapter 9 discusses the ways in which Kimbanguism, a religious movement originating in Congo, constitutes sacred geographies and thereby connects localities to global imaginaries. Adogame shows how African
initiated Pentecostalism develops from house cells to Warehouse churches, constituting transnational religious fields. Finally, Coleman concludes the book with a strongly theorized discussion of the ways in which Charismatics construct the globe.

As a whole, this book presents a wide-ranging, thoroughly researched overview of the ways in which spirits and the Holy Spirit are entwined with and constitute transnational life. For scholars of Pentecostalism it is of interest not only because of the many excellent contributions on Pentecostalism, but also because of the attempt to compare Pentecostal practices with spirit centred practices. In most chapters, except the contribution by De Witte, these two subjects remain separate, and the insights comparison can yield remain implicit. The theoretical implications of this comparison remain a topic for future work.