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Reconversion and Retrieval: Nonlinear Change in African Catholic Practice

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Abstract: Against models of conversion that presume a trajectory or a progression from one religion to another, this article proposes a less linear, more complex, and ultimately more empirical understanding of religious change in Africa. It does so by foregrounding the particularities of Roman Catholicism—its privileging of materiality and practice, and of community and tradition. In the course of so doing, this article explores the overlaps between modernist thinking, Protestant ideals, and teleological trajectories; the factors behind reconversion and religious oscillation in sub-Saharan African contexts; inculturation and other continuity paradigms in Catholicism; the significance of the Renaissance for early modern Catholic missions; and the ministry of a contemporary Italian Catholic missionary serving in northern Mozambique. This article proposes that Catholic history and Catholic assumptions offer valuable resources for thinking beyond and thinking against linear models of religious conversion.

Keywords: Roman Catholicism; conversion; reconversion; modernity; linearity; missionaries; Mozambique

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1. Introduction

This is a story of crucifixes and converts, of the transmission and reception of religious images, ideas, and institutions in an African missionary encounter that transformed everything and everyone involved. When Italian-born Roman Catholic missionaries arrived among the Makhuwa of northern Mozambique in the early twentieth century, they came bearing the standard European crucifix. The image of the crucified Christ was the familiar one in Catholic iconography—the savior laid bare on a cross, nailed to two straight bars meeting at a perfect right angle. Before long, though, things took new shape—sometimes the body of Christ (made to display a subtly more feminine shape), but mostly the cross on which he lay. Its right angle was softened and its rectilinear bars curved, allowed to undulate and twist as wood in the natural world often does. When Catholic missionaries initially arrived among the Makhuwa, they came insisting that converts leave much behind: their past, their traditions, their ancestors. But later leaders came to soften their rigidity, and with it their most sacred symbol.

My first book on Makhuwa religion chronicled the ambivalence with which another form of Christianity—Pentecostalism—has been received in northern Mozambique (Premawardhana 2018). Unlike everywhere else in sub-Saharan Africa (or so it seems), here Pentecostal churches have failed to flourish. I argued that this owes largely to the reluctance of the Makhuwa, until recently a semi-nomadic hunting people, to affix to one place or one institution. While I emphasized the Makhuwa disposition toward mobility and malleability, Pentecostal pastors themselves pin blame on the local Catholic priests and catechists, on the manner in which they permit people to be Christian while still propitiating their ancestors and performing traditional ceremonies. Catholicism in this way has come to resonate, in a way Pentecostalism does not, with the Makhuwa predilection for mobility and plurality, for flexibility and accommodation. This goes far toward explaining Catholicism's successful spread in the region—claiming approximately 50% of the district population after a century

of presence—and, for the same reason, Pentecostalism's failure. Basing this article partially on my Mozambican fieldwork and partially on existing scholarship that I review and synthesize, I elaborate here (more than I could in my first book) on the Catholic dimension of the story. I explore aspects of the Catholic tradition (in this article, I mean by this specifically the Roman Catholic tradition) that have lent it a capacity to embrace the "old" even while introducing the "new", to bend without breaking—not unlike the Makhuwa people, not unlike the Makhuwa crucifix.

The subject of this article is religious conversion in Roman Catholic perspective and in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly as the topic has been addressed in anthropological literature. The classic statement on religious conversion in sub-Saharan Africa belongs to Robin Horton. In a series of articles in the 1970s, Horton argued that conversion to Islam and Christianity corresponds with larger political and economic shifts Africans underwent during the colonial period: from relatively bounded microcosms (e.g., the stereotypical African village) to relatively open macrocosms (e.g., the globalized nation-state). Noteworthy in Horton's model is his recognition of the capacity of traditional religions to manage this change, insofar as African cosmologies also (typically) have a Supreme Being that governs at a universal scale well beyond that of the lower or lesser spirits. In the sociological shift from the micro scale to the macro scale, that Supreme Being is activated, but so too is the appeal of the monotheistic God of Islam and Christianity. Thus, the "world religions" really only catalyze or stimulate cosmological changes already transpiring from the bottom-up, changes "that were 'in the air' anyway" (Horton 1971, p. 104). While commendable for privileging African agency in the conversion process, more problematically Horton operates with what is, in Western thought, a mostly taken-for-granted teleology—wherein progress, evolution, and change in general are assumed to be unidirectional and irreversible. This is the operative trajectory in most accounts (not just Horton's) of religious conversion—*from* one religion *to* another religion.

This has not gone uncontested, though, even within the social sciences. Take, for example, an article by Mario Aguilar, the title of which—"African Conversion from a World Religion"—reveals an alternative, one involving fluidity and "reconversion" insofar as the Waso Boorana of East Africa stress traditional practices even while keeping Muslim public rituals (Aguilar 1995). Consider too an article by Robert Baum, who also describes as "reconversion" the manner in which the Diola of West Africa reject, in this case, Christianity after first embracing it (Baum 1990). Both scholars follow Horton in emphasizing local African dynamics—herd diversification strategies in the case of Aguilar, indigenous spiritual needs in the case of Baum. But both authors deploy these local dynamics *against* the other element of Horton's theory of conversion: its assumption of linearity. This article echoes Aguilar's and Baum's earlier challenges to Horton's teleology by highlighting the phenomenon of "reconversion"—by which I mean nonlinear religious change often entailing a return to that from which one earlier moved away—in cases, such as those of the Makhuwa, where becoming Catholic has not meant renouncing indigenous cultural or religious traditions. This article differs from those mentioned, however, by shifting registers from the local to the translocal, indeed to arguably the most global of all institutions. It highlights the capacity of one macrocosmic factor to help condition the possibility of bi-directionality in Catholic conversion: the factor of Catholicism itself. I argue that the particularities of Roman Catholicism—its privileging of materiality and practice, of community and tradition, and of continuities across epochs and cultures—open analytic space for a less linear, more complex, and ultimately more empirical understanding of religious conversion in sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Teleology of Modernity

There is a connection—an analogy at least—between linear models of religious change and what James Ferguson calls the "teleological evolutionary narratives" operative in the natural sciences and social sciences alike, narratives assuming linear movement from one discrete stage to another (Ferguson 1999, pp. 42–43). Anthropologists of religious change have not easily escaped the pull of modernist thinking (Gooren 2014, pp. 103–4), though scholars have noted the affinity. Birgit Meyer, for example, has commented on the consonance between conversion, conceptualized as rupture

with the past, and "modernity's self-definition in terms of progress and continuous renewal" (Meyer 1998, p. 317). If linear conversions are linked to modernization narratives, then it is also worth noting that Western modernity is predicated, at least in part, on the Protestant Reformation.[1] As Protestantism came to be distinguished from Catholicism, Catholicism came to be regarded as outside modernity—pre-modern or even anti-modern. In what Robert Orsi calls "the normative teleology of modernity", the premodern must yield to the modern in all areas of life (Orsi 2005, p. 156). Such a periodization itself, though, is reliant upon a non-repeating model of time. But this is a particularly modern model (Eliade 1954). As Jason Bruner puts it in his study of the persistence of non-Christian spiritual agents among Christian converts, such scenarios "require the historian not to assume a clear trajectory of progress, which is endemic to a modern, Western conceptualization of history itself" (Bruner 2019, p. 320). The idea of a trajectory from pre-modern to modern, from Catholic to Protestant, has come also to mean a trajectory from the nonlinear to the linear—a trajectory toward thinking of history as a trajectory.

One factor among others making it hard to acknowledge the nonlinearity of religious change, the oscillations and equivocation that frequently characterize conversion, is the scholarly bias toward Protestant (deemed modern) forms of religion. As Fenella Cannell argues, this normative Protestantism is rooted in Weberian assumptions about Protestantism displacing Catholicism and paving the path to secularism and capitalism (Cannell 2005, p. 341). The consonance of modern scholarship and modern religion may be in part why Pentecostalism—often classified as a form of Protestantism, but committed even more than mainline Protestant churches to the modernist ideal of breaking with the past—has attracted so much scholarly attention.[2] Studies of Pentecostalism have exploded (no less than Pentecostal churches are said to), leading increasing numbers of Africanists to worry about the relative absence of attention to mainline Protestantism, African Initiated Churches, and Catholicism.[3]

Of course, in Africa and elsewhere, Catholic leaders have a long history of negating and denigrating local cultures, of demanding conversion in much the same terms that Pentecostal leaders do today. Yet there are significant strands of Catholic history to be explored in this paper that indicate or at least permit a more fluid and complex model of religious change. If Robert Strayer is right that "[t]here can be no linear description of modern African religious history which points to the steady erosion of traditional systems in favour of Christianity" (Strayer 1976, p. 10), we could better appreciate this complexity by looking "past Pentecostalism" (Engelke 2010) and indeed past Protestantism. It is especially the pronounced materialist and embodied strands of the Catholic tradition—the emphasis given to objects and practices—together with Catholicism's overall embeddedness in a deep historical past, that help to open analytical space for a less linear understanding of religious conversion in Africa.

What Orsi calls "the normative teleology of modernity" consists of numerous interconnected shifts. Each has been gradual, but also inexorable and by now definitive of what is taken to be the modern condition. Each also has deep roots in the Protestant Reformation. First is the shift of agency from things to people. Calvinist polemics against Catholicism entailed the denial of divine presence in material objects. The widespread dissemination of this view, beyond Protestantism and into secular modernity, informs contemporary judgments about proper, mature, or civilized religion. Such judgments take Catholic spirituality—"that array of practices, objects, liquids, images, ceremonies, and gestures by which Catholics had engaged the presence of God, the Mother of God, and the saints" (Orsi 2005, p. 154)—to be infantile, unhealthy, and backward. Modern religion involves immaterial meanings, propositional beliefs, and explanatory discourse. It involves a shift from bodily practices

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[1]　As Fenella Cannell has written, "Insofar as [modernity] implies an irreversible break with the past, after which the world is utterly transformed in mysterious ways, it is itself modeled on the Christian idea of conversion" (Cannell 2006, p. 29).

[2]　Matthew Engelke has noted, "against the negative stereotypes of African culture and the African past, Pentecostals often define themselves as modern—as looking forward, not back, and as thus free from the chains of tradition" (Engelke 2010, p. 177).

[3]　See, for example, (Engelke 2010; Maxwell 2006, p. 392; Soares 2014, p. 28).

and material mediations to the more intellectual, cognitive, or propositional properties of faith—"a shift form an ethos of presence and sacred intimacy toward a culture bounded by, and even obsessed with, words" (Orsi 2005, p. 157). Thus arises what anthropologist Talal Asad describes as the peculiarly "modern idea that a practitioner cannot know how to live religiously without being able to articulate that knowledge" (Asad 1993, p. 36), a world in which the cognitive and rational take precedence over the pragmatic and performative.

This shift away from a pre-modern understanding of a comingling of materiality and agency, of objects and subjects, accompanied a parallel shift away from a collectivist understanding of the self toward an individualist one. Here also the Protestant influence is clear. Agency among moderns rests properly in individual human subjects, not in objects and rituals, but also not in clerical or other social structures. As Webb Keane puts it, "At the heart of this version of the modern subject is the conjunction of personal and historical self-transformation with a vision of a self that must be abstracted from material and social entanglements" (Keane 2007, p. 55). There has been not only a conversion to modernity (van der Veer 1996)—that is, a cultural shift giving unprecedented primacy to individual agency—but also a modernizing of conversion. The early modern period witnessed an emerging sense that individual self-creation matters more than emplacing oneself within a social context or a historical tradition. There was, thus, a "devaluation of tradition in the name of historical progress" (Keane 2007, p. 201). With that devaluation, questions hitherto inconceivable came into being, questions such as "should I convert to another religion/no religion?" (Taylor 2009, p. 149). To convert in this sense from one religion to another is itself only possible with modernity. It is a possibility predicated on the severing of the self from material and social entanglements, the privileging of autonomous individuality over embedded sociality, and the concomitant devaluation of ties to deep pasts and historical traditions.

3. Narratives of Reconversion

In linear accounts of African conversion to Christianity and Islam, modernist assumptions are often presupposed—not just in the domain of political economy (as in Horton's theory that religious conversion and political modernization coincide), but also in terms of more fundamental shifts regarding religion and personhood: from a materialist to an intellectualist orientation and from a collectivist to an individualist one. Horton's theory of conversion, for example, is known as an intellectualist one which emphasizes religion as a tool for explanation, prediction, and control. Likewise, in her account of conversion to Seventh Day Adventism in Madagascar, Eva Keller reports among her informants a strong embrace of meaning-centered approaches to religion (Keller 2005). Importantly, both Horton and Keller describe conversion not only in intellectualist but also in linear, unidirectional terms.

By contrast, in many nonlinear accounts of conversion, "pre-modern" orientations—toward materiality and social connections, practice and pragmatism—predominate. It thus becomes noteworthy that, in Africa, stories of re-conversion—of gradual, fluid, and even oscillatory religious shifts—proliferate particularly in contexts where the self is understood to be embedded and entangled in material and social relations. Such embeddedness holds true of African societies generally, with their largely relational understanding of personhood, but even more so when the religions to (or from) which one is converting are themselves steeped in material, corporeal, and ritual dimensions.

Thus, many accounts of nonlinear conversion have to do with Islam and Catholic (more than Protestant) Christianity. Islam is focal in Aguilar's study of reconversion in Kenya (Aguilar 1995), in Michael Lambek's work out of Mayotte problematizing the category of conversion "insofar as it implies converting 'from' as well as 'to'" (Lambek 2000, p. 65), and Brian Peterson's preference for "drifting" over "opting" to emphasize the piecemeal nature of religious change in rural French Sudan (Peterson 2011). Catholicism is the relevant religion in Baum's study of "reconversion" in West Africa and in Paul Kollman's study of religious history in east Africa. In the latter, Kollman writes, "Religious identities can change, but conversion, with its emphasis on interior beliefs, misrepresents

what usually happens, which is best understood at the level of practices" (Kollman 2005, p. 17). Switching from a paradigmatically Protestant preoccupation with beliefs to a more Catholic concern with practices brings complex patterns of entrance and exit into view—such as in Kollman's description of converts' pragmatic motivations, often having to do with labor conditions, for joining only to later flee Catholic mission stations. In his article on "Non-linear Conversion in a Gambia Borderland", Steven Thomson develops the critique of linear conversion models in slightly different ways, involving three traditions and transits between them (Thomson 2012). Yet here, also, it is telling that the religions under discussion are Islam and specifically Catholic Christianity, an indication again of the elective affinity between these two forms of religion and the materialist and socially/historically embedded orientation that demands a more dialectical model of religious change.

One must not be overly determinative, however, in associating Protestantism with singular allegiance and unidirectional conversion while associating Islam and Catholicism with fluidity and oscillation. Clearly, exclusive religious identities have been part of the story of African Catholicism (as I will touch on below) and African Islam (Fisher 1985, p. 165). Regarding Islam, Janet McIntosh, in her study based in Kenya, differentiates between Swahili versions of Islam and more porous versions prevalent among the ethnic Giriama. She describes the former along the lines I have been describing Protestantism: in terms of individual choice, intellectual beliefs, and inflexible religious affiliations. By contrast, Giriama traditionalists "often attempt to draw pragmatically upon the potency of more than one religious locus at a time, a pluralistic practice that dramatically violates the Swahili expectation that only one religion can have a monopoly on Truth" (McIntosh 2009, p. 20). What this shows is that the varieties of Islam in Africa are at least as great as the varieties of Christianity.

Moreover, numerous studies of Protestantism in Africa also describe conversion as a cyclical process rather than a linear progress. Perhaps the most well-known account of give-and-take between Protestant missionaries and indigenous Africans is Jean and John Comaroff's study of the "long conversations" (as opposed to sudden conversions) that transpired in southern Africa. The problem the Comaroffs raise with conversion as an analytical category is that it reifies "beliefs" and "belief systems", whereas those with whom the Comaroffs worked expressed a more fluid and relativist religious disposition, "not constrained … by the notion that adherence to one religion excluded involvement in all others" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, p. 250). An objectification of such differences gradually emerged, with a more rationalist, intellectualist orientation supplanting this earlier pluralism, thus illustrating the power of Protestant missionaries to transmit a modern worldview to converts and non-converts alike. Yet, significant about the Comaroffs' study is the way that Protestantism did not immediately or automatically preclude non-Protestant—meaning nonlinear—ways of dealing with Protestantism.

In a similar vein, Birgit Meyer's study of Ghanaian (Ewe) converts to Protestantism demonstrates a link between materiality and porosity. Protestant missionaries' concern with an individual's state of mind was not shared by Ewe converts because of a fundamental difference in their conception of religion: "for the Ewe, religion could not be reduced to a state of mind, but was closely connected with everyday life. To them, it was not just a matter of belief but a praxis linking the ideal and the practical" (Meyer 1999, pp. 12–13). This practical orientation facilitated the same kind of dialectic observed by the Comaroffs in southern Africa. People returned to traditional priests when sick and unable to recover through Christian means (Meyer 1999, p. 104), a facility of reconversion owing to the fact that the Ewe did not conceive of religions as discrete systems of "belief".[4] In all these accounts, what are emphasized are not the frameworks to which people convert, but the indigenous understandings that, along the lines in which Catholicism is often dismissively described, prioritize material entanglements, practical imperatives, and social embeddedness.

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[4]   On the relationship between the reification of belief and the reality of religious pluralism, see also (Kirsch 2004).

In his critique of continuity thinking in studies of religious change, Robbins accuses anthropologists of paying insufficient attention to the particularities of Christian models of time adopted by those who convert to Christianity (Robbins 2007). But by Christian models of time, Robbins means specifically Pentecostal or, more generally, Protestant models of time. If one starts with different models and emphasizes social and material concerns rather than narrowly intellectualist ones, the story may look quite different. My argument is that the qualities of religiosity especially associated with Catholicism and Islam differentiate both from Protestantism and provide conditions for the possibility of nonlinear conversions.

I do not mean to suggest too close an association, however. As with the Comaroffs' account of Protestantism, and as with McIntosh's account of Islam, the spur to a more circular pattern of conversion may be not the "world religions" to which but the indigenous baseline from which one converts. It cannot be said, therefore, that Islam and Catholicism are sufficient explanatory factors behind fluid religious identities. It is, however, noteworthy that when "re-conversions" occur, they are almost always for pragmatic and materialist rather than intellectualist reasons—and therefore, according to the typology presented above, for more "Catholic" than "Protestant" reasons. How precisely African Catholicism provides conditions for the possibility of such reconversions is the question to which I now turn.

4. Retrieval and Renaissance in Catholic Thought and History

Joel Robbins' analytic of rupture has been field-defining for the anthropology of Christianity, so influential that when David Maxwell questions, as have I, Robbins' "extreme emphasis on evangelical Protestantism", he does so on the grounds that African Catholics also instantiate radical disjuncture (Maxwell 2007, p. 26). Be that as it may, what of the possibility that Catholic perspectives open up a different analytic altogether (Hann 2017)?

In *The Anthropology of Catholicism*, editors Kristin Norget, Valentina Napolitano, and Maya Mayblin raise precisely this possibility—of a theoretical shift (beyond rupture) to accompany the empirical shift (beyond Pentecostalism). When it comes to Catholicism, they note, "continuity emerges time and again as an ethnographic concept in its own terms in the guise of 'tradition'—a value that derives partly from the theological principle of apostolic succession" (Mayblin et al. 2017, p. 5). Catholicism distinguishes itself from Protestantism through its strong sense of historical continuity. It is not so much about breaking with the past as it is about retrieving and reestablishing ties to Catholicism as an institution and to Catholicism as a historical tradition. Yet there is nothing dulling or deadening about such retrieval; it is not an act of passive reproduction (Bandak 2017). Rather, it entails an ongoing process of what Matt Tomlinson calls "transformative reengagement" (Tomlinson 2014, p. 166), a fittingly paradoxical expression that reveals continuity to be a labor-intensive project consisting of repetition *and* differentiation, preservation *and* change.

Throughout the world, Catholicism has exhibited this characteristic continuity not only with respect to its centralized institutional past, but also with respect to its diverse cultural contexts (see, e.g., (Orta 2004)). As a global religion, Catholicism makes claims to universality, and yet despite—or perhaps because of—doing so, it is able to accommodate competing ideas and brook compromises with local cultures (Hoenes del Pinal 2017, p. 171). Compromise became official policy during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), a moment of radical self-critique, of questioning earlier domineering attitudes toward non-Western cultures and non-Christian religions. Vatican II formalized mission principles such as "accommodation" or "adaptation", and through such documents as *Lumen Gentium*, *Nostra Aetate*, and *Ad Gentes* revolutionized modern mission theology. Although African religions went unmentioned in these documents (Isichei 1995, p. 327), the post-conciliar mood of liberalism, ecumenism, and pluralism led African bishops and theologians—albeit not without opposition, even from other African Church leaders—to make their contribution by theorizing and operationalizing "inculturation" and "incarnation" as conceptual alternatives to "adaptation" and its connotation of theological unity. Inculturation signals respect for customs and teachings

considered to be aspects of Eternal Truth, even if foreign to the Christian tradition; incarnation signals the Church's willingness to immerse itself in African cultures, taking upon itself idioms, symbols, concepts, and other elements previously deemed foreign if not heathen. This shift in missionary approaches coincided with decolonization and cultural renaissance movements in most African countries (Hastings 1989, pp. 27–29). Out of that climate emerged a significant concern with searching out "authentic" African expressions of Christianity, with "Africanizing" the church. Although the top-down nature of Africanization efforts and the artifice of authenticity have been rightly problematized (Meyer 2004, pp. 454–55; Lado 2017), the significance of these efforts to establish cultural continuities with local contexts should not be minimized. They illustrate a capacity within Catholicism to connect with languages, cultures, and even religions at the grassroots. William Burrows writes that what he calls the "Catholic inculturation paradigm" is marked by "a radical vision of what is entailed in interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue that leads to the contextualization and inculturation of Christianity" (Burrows 1997, p. 131). According to this paradigm, not rupture but continuity is privileged—in this case, not (or not just) across time but also across cultures, and even across religions.

Of course, the Catholic Church was not always so accommodating of local cultural contexts; that it was often belligerent and hostile toward them is what made the Second Vatican Council so revolutionary. A tension has long existed in Catholic mission history between the impulse to assimilate and the impulse to adapt (Kollman 2005, p. 104). During the medieval and early modern periods, most dominant was what William Burrows follows missions historian David Bosch in calling the "missionary war" motif, the goal of which was "to lead non-believers to surrender to Christ and to create civilizations dominated by Christian values" (Burrows 1997, p. 124). This notion of missions-as-conquest manifested in hostilities toward Islam, most manifest during the Crusades, and antipathy toward indigenous cultures and other religions, most manifest during colonial expansion. At the level of culture and everyday life, it required a tabula rasa outlook, the notions "that there is nothing valuable in non-Western cultures upon which the missionary can build" and that missionary efforts must be as much to convey Christianity as to eradicate local religions, cultures, and ways of life (Sindima 1994, p. 62). The goal was not to transform non-European cultures and non-Christian religions, but to vanquish them, and then to introduce in their wake Western Christian values, norms, and habits.

In the realm of education, a prime site for the confluence of Christianizing and "civilizing" missions during the colonial period, students on the receiving end of missionary outreach were trained not only to speak like missionaries, to dress and pray like them, and to adopt names like theirs. More fundamentally, they were taught to rethink the nature of time and to know their place in the progression of human history. In his analysis of Catholic hymns introduced to the Dinka of Sudan in the late colonial period, Francis Deng notes schoolchildren began expressing, through song, contempt for "pagan priests", and the novel idea that they should "be ashamed of where they stood in the newly postulated scale of progress" (Deng 1988, p. 162). Yet, as shame-inducing as Catholic teachings were, the ideology of progress and development were far more intense in their secular forms. It is especially the postcolonial nation-state's teleology of development, Deng notes, that infringed on Dinka pride and sense of independence (Deng 1988, p. 169). As Godfrey Lienhardt, also working among the Dinka, argues, "the acceptance of the Church came through foreign *secular* ideas of progress and development for the most part material, which had little to do with the main evangelical purposes or teaching of the missions" ((Lienhardt 1982, p. 89); emphasis mine). By contrast, Lienhardt notes "a liberal tradition of Catholic thought which must recommend itself to those who find no authority in Christian teaching for condemnation of indigenous dancing and drinking, for example" (Lienhardt 1982, p. 86).[5]

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5 In a similar vein, Brendan Carmody notes in Vatican II's shift away from the imperative to convert all non-Catholics to the Church an opportunity for Catholic education in Africa to return to its more holistic approach. However, it would be a return with a difference: not to be primarily an instrument of conversion, as before, but rather to be inclusive of the variety of students' religious affiliations and lived experiences (Carmody 2001).

This more liberal Catholic tradition "presupposes a comprehension of 'pagan philosophies'" (Lienhardt 1982, p. 86), connecting to classical antiquity in ways that again illustrate the themes of retrieval and continuity with the past that, as I have been arguing, also helped shape Catholic attitudes of respect for and continuity with "pagan" cultures of the present. The similarity becomes again apparent when one looks to early modern antecedents to Vatican II policies of accommodation and inculturation. Before the suppression of the Society of Jesus in the eighteenth century, many Jesuits in particular practiced an accommodational approach to missions. Matteo Ricci is perhaps the best-known example—a sixteenth century Jesuit who evangelized in China by first patiently and painstakingly studying its languages, philosophies, and religions in order to communicate Christianity through them, rather than impose it from above.

Here, also, openness to cultural continuity is tied to a deep sense of historical continuity. The exceptional nature of the Society of Jesus surely goes a long way toward explaining the accommodating spirit of early modern Jesuit missionaries. But also relevant may be the mostly Italian origins of those exemplifying what Alessandro Valignano, one such early modern Italian Jesuit, termed *il modo soave*—itself an Italian expression that elevated as missionary virtues sweetness and gentleness over hostility and aggression (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, p. 202). Besides Ricci and Valignano, one thinks also of Roberto de Nobili. Of course, one should not draw too direct a link between national origin and missionary attitudes. There were non-Italian Catholic missionaries, such as the Spanish Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas, who campaigned for the rights of indigenous peoples of the Americas; other Iberian missionaries established *reducciones* in part to protect native Americans from slavers and conquistadores. Further, the founding Jesuit Francis Xavier (from Spain) and the missionary Alexander de Rhodes (from France) are often grouped with Ricci, Valignano, and de Nobili in recognition of their accommodational approach to missions. It is worth noting, however, that as inclusive and respectful as these latter were, there were also limitations not so apparent among Italians. Xavier "still basically followed the *tabula rasa* perspective—having contempt for Hinduism, Islam and traditional religion", at least initially (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, p. 185). For his part, when it came to Confucianism and ancestor veneration, de Rhodes "had a less appreciative attitude than Ricci and his fellow Jesuits in China" (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, p. 191).

This point about Italian provenance is relevant, given that in the early modern period, Italy (different from Portugal and Spain) was not engaged in overseas empire-building. Rather, the relevant context for early modern Italian missionaries is their upbringing in the incubator of the Renaissance, an intellectual and artistic movement that immediately preceded the onset of global Catholic missions. The Renaissance was about many things, but one of its central aims was to reconfigure the relationship between Christianity and pagan antiquity. It proposed a new appreciation for the Greco-Roman world, portraying it as a foundation for, rather than nemesis of, Christianity. It is thus relevant that Ricci and other Jesuit missionary pioneers "were greatly influenced by Italian humanism rather than by the Spanish conquistador environment", and considered the Asian civilizations to which they traveled to be analogs of the ancient Greco-Roman world ((Bevans and Schroeder 2004, pp. 194–95); see also (Ross 1994)). The Renaissance emphasis on historical retrieval shows, as does Vatican II's own revival of the methods of early modern Jesuits, how closely Catholicism's ability to establish continuities across cultures is tied to its sense of continuities across time.

5. Reverse Missions in Mozambique

In exploring what I argue is a proclivity for continuity in the Catholic tradition, I have dwelt as much as I have on the particularly Italian heritage of early modern Jesuit missions to set the stage for what I address in this article's final main section: the ministry of Giuseppe Frizzi, an Italian priest who has been working in Mozambique since 1987. Padre (Father) Frizzi belongs to an Italian Catholic missionary order called the *Istituto Missioni della Consolata* (Consolata Missionary Institute). It was founded in 1901 by Giuseppe Allamano of Turin, who is said to have taken inspiration for his missionary society from the example of Matteo Ricci. Born in Bergamo in the Lombard region

of Italy, Padre Frizzi undertook seminary training in Rome around the time of the Second Vatican Council—the right place at the right time to launch him into the kind of ministry he would eventually undertake. His style of evangelization reflects well the new dispensation. Now in his seventies and still active in day-to-day ministerial responsibilities in Maúa district, he has indigenized the Catholic liturgy—conducting masses only in the local Makhuwa language. He has compiled both a Makhuwa-Portuguese dictionary and a Makhuwa ethnographic encyclopedia. He oversaw the revival of initiation rites after a period of state-ordered suppression, as well as the cultivation of Makhuwa art and artifacts (including the redesigned Catholic crucifix, described in this paper's introduction). He exudes an exceptionally sensitive, respectful, and deferential posture toward Makhuwa indigenous traditions—the languages, the culture, the religion. He is so widely respected that even members of the local Muslim population refer to him as "bambo ahu" (our priest, in the Makhuwa language).

Padre Frizzi's approach could be described as one of inculturation if not for the fact that he himself rejects the term. It does not go far enough, he has told me, as it is still top-down, premised on a hierarchical relationship. His interest is not only in introducing Christian truths in Makhuwa idioms, but also in rethinking Christian truths through the equally compelling truths of Makhuwa religion. Rather than inculturation, he speaks of "interculturation".[6] He is interested in allowing his encounter with Makhuwa concepts, thoughts, and stories to awaken him to aspects of the Christian tradition that have been occluded, denied, or even absent over the course of its history. He is able to recover and revivify his own tradition by allowing himself to be witnessed to by those he came to witness to. In this sense, he is a kind of "reverse missionary", not in the conventional sense that scholars have come to use that term—for a person of the global South who spreads the gospel to Europe and North America. Rather, he is a reverse missionary in the sense of a foreign missionary willing to be learn from those he ostensibly came only to teach.[7] This idea resonates with Padre Frizzi: in his scholarship in the area of Biblical studies, particularly regarding his specialty in the texts of Luke, Padre Frizzi writes explicitly of "the come-back mission" and "returned missionaries" (Frizzi 2010, p. 44), describing the missionary as one who operates retrospectively and "advances backpedaling" (Frizzi 2010, p. 38). Over the span of the nearly four decades that he has worked among the Makhuwa, Padre Frizzi has derived from their indigenous worldview nothing less than a revised understanding of God.[8] As the Makhuwa, a matrilineal and matricentric people, refer to their supreme being (Muluku) as feminine and associate her with such ideals as companionship, cohabitation, and communion, so too Padre Frizzi has come to critique the traditionally Christian notion of God as autonomous and self-sufficient—and male. Those ideals are symbolized by the sun, as opposed to the moon. During the day, the moon and stars recede from view, which is why God—as Padre Frizzi claims to have learned from the Makhuwa—is more lunar than solar, more nocturnal than diurnal, more feminine than masculine (Frizzi 2010, pp. 26–27).

I suggest there are two salient points for understanding the dialogical nature of Padre Frizzi's missionary work. First is his Italian-nurtured appreciation for history, including classical antiquity—which Italians of his generation, particularly those training for ministry, were all deeply taught. Modernity in this context meant not a rupture from the past but a revivification of the present through the resources of the past. This legacy of the Italian Renaissance disabled a tabula rasa approach to "pagan" philosophies and cultures, and prepared Padre Frizzi to see value and virtue in cultures

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[6]　For elaborations of the term interculturation, see (Shorter 1988, pp. 13–16); from the perspective of Consolata missionaries, including Padre Frizzi, see (Consolata Missionary Institute 2010).

[7]　For a critical overview of the discourse of "reverse mission", including an early definition having to do with learning from indigenous people and their leaders in the mission field and then advocating for their causes back in the missionary's home, see (Morier-Genoud 2018).

[8]　In this sense, Padre Frizzi can also be considered a comparative theologian (though he himself does not use this term) in the sense developed by Francis Clooney. Comparative theologians embrace vulnerability and risk by crossing over from their home tradition into another, later to return home with new and potentially destabilizing theological insights (see Clooney 2010).

and traditions that are frequently, from Eurocentric and colonizing perspectives, despised. It prepared him to be a devotee and lifelong student of the linguistic and cultural wealth of the Makhuwa people.

The second point is Padre Frizzi's approach to multiculturalism and multilingualism. Here also there is a link to his Italian origins. Pride in the local appears to be common in Italy; it was, after all, relatively late in European history that it underwent political unification. But local pride especially characterizes Padre Frizzi's hometown of Bergamo. As David Gilmour notes in his survey of Italy's diverse regions, "many people in the Lombard town of Bergamo still refuse to speak anything other than *bergamasco*" (Gilmour 2011, p. 36). It is likely that Padre Frizzi's decision to devote himself to the study not only of Makhuwa but of specific Makhuwa dialects reflects Italians' own historical resistance to centralization. As Ian Linden notes in neighboring Malawi, most Catholic priests came from European peasant societies and were more devoted to the recreation of local communities than to modernist projects of unification and centralized control (Linden 1974). Padre Frizzi certainly fits that pattern, insofar as he himself hails from a small-town, dialect-speaking background, from which he gained a profound appreciation for the rural, the local, and the particular.

These are just two factors that shed some light on Padre Frizzi's unique style of evangelizing: his embrace of opportunities to be reconverted and reawakened by his engagement with the religious ideas and practices of the Makhuwa. I do not mean to imply that Padre Frizzi's approach to missions can be exhaustively explained by these factors, and it is of course the case that not all missionaries with such a background minister the way Padre Frizzi does; meanwhile, Catholic priests with other cultural backgrounds and orientations showed themselves also willing to rethink fundamental truths of the Christian tradition on the basis of their encounter with African practices and ideas.[9] The point of laying out these issues is to provide context for understanding Padre Frizzi's ministry, not to provide an airtight explanation of it. I acknowledge also that it is possible to read Padre Frizzi's deep study of the Makhuwa language and his meticulous documentation of Makhuwa proverbs and practices as a ploy in service to his real objective: that of delivering converts to the one and only truth found in the Catholic Church and the Christian tradition. But this would be to miss that his very understanding of truth is itself informed by Makhuwa sensibilities that he described once, in conversation with me, in terms of their:

> dynamism, movement, acceptance of alterity, more so even because of their oral culture that does not accept having everything fixed in place. Since childhood, the Makhuwa live this dynamism of speech, of dialogue, of not fixing things in place, of not reducing the truth to a written, linear dimension. The truth is always dynamic, always dialogic, with all the richness that writing lacks.

Here, incidentally, one also sees the importance of material and oral culture, Padre Frizzi's Makhuwa-inspired aversion to dominant cognitive and propositional approaches to faith—and, thus, in ways described earlier in this article, his aversion to Protestant-inflected modernity. This is the perspective that informed Padre Frizzi's sanctioning of the curvilinear crucifix and his valorizing of nonlinear ways of being and knowing in general. The nonlinearity with which Padre Frizzi describes Makhuwa epistemology befits, in turn, the nonlinearity of his own spiritual journey—his willingness to convert, in a sense, to Makhuwa wisdom traditions as a way of reconverting to his Christian faith.

To be sure, there are limits to Padre Frizzi's approach. One might fault him for reifying and essentializing a notion of "Makhuwa tradition" that, as he himself would recognize, does not lend itself to being codified in dictionaries and encyclopedias. However, it is precisely the epistemological construct of two disparate and relatively stable traditions—Makhuwa and Christian—that allows Padre Frizzi to move one step further than those who champion "inculturation", which, as the insertion of the Christian faith into a local culture, is ultimately a synthesizing and unifying move. As mentioned,

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[9] Some of the better-known examples among Catholic missionary priests in Africa include Placide Tempels (see Diagne 2016, pp. 25–27) and Charles de Foucauld (see Shapiro 1981).

Padre Frizzi's preferred term is "interculturation" in recognition of the integrity of both sides in the exchange, and of both sides' (including Catholicism's) non-absolute status. He describes learning theological truths, even about Catholicism, from the Makhuwa as an achievement of "[c]ontinuity in discontinuity and otherness, empathic dialogue in giving and receiving that ends up in an exchange of gifts" (Frizzi 2010, p. 30). Missionary work for Padre Frizzi is just such a process of going and returning, giving and receiving, with the missionary best described as one who "advances backpedaling". Conversion, thus, is ongoing. It is as nonstop and nonlinear as truth itself.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to think through a particularly significant aspect of the place where I conduct fieldwork—the local priest's openness to reconversion and a kind of reverse missionary project—by situating his work against the backdrop of Catholic understandings of continuity in Africa and elsewhere. To be sure, it is empirically dubious to bifurcate Catholicism and Protestantism into two essentially different spheres—one marked by materiality and continuity, the other marked by ideation and rupture. Ample counter-examples can be found on both sides (Brown and Feener 2017, p. 4). Nevertheless, I point in this paper to the importance of balancing anthropological studies of Christianity as a religion of rupture and discontinuity with lesser-known accounts of conversion that foreground such themes as retrieval and reconversion. The argument of this paper is that the study of Catholicism can be profitably marshalled to aid in this recalibration. As Robert Orsi writes with respect to the study of Catholic enchantment in a disenchanted academy, so too would I argue with respect to the study of Catholic nonlinearity in a linear academy: Catholicism invites us "to ask questions at odds with the assumptions and expectations of the intellectual disciplines of the modern world" (Orsi 2007, p. 40).

This article has emphasized the values of material and historical embeddedness in Catholic thinking and practice. I close by echoing what numerous scholars writing anthropologically about Catholicism have recently emphasized: the tradition's fundamental elasticity. Maya Mayblin has richly developed this idea, arguing in an article titled "The Ultimate Return" for an analytical distinction between "dissenting" and "being with dissent". She finds in Catholic practice a capacity for registering dissent without the need for the kinds of schism one finds throughout the history of Protestantism. Mayblin criticizes the degree to which a Protestant perspective has influenced Catholic historiography, leading to the privileging of institutional differentiation over dissent from within. This requires a more Catholic sensibility since, as Mayblin puts it, Catholicism seems to have "peculiarly elastic capacities when it comes to containing difference" (Mayblin 2019, p. 145).[10]

By virtue of its elasticity, Catholicism makes a particularly relevant topic of study for anthropologists insofar as Catholicism upholds, without too quickly dissolving, such tensions as that between the many and the one, the local and the global. Inculturation as a concept has been rightly criticized for its elitism and its tendency toward essentialism. Yet, in the long-term "interculturated" ministry of missionary priests like Padre Frizzi, one sees something slightly different: a more grounded, dialogical, and receptive approach that opens space for local perspectives and agency to be recognized and accepted. Though it is often said that Catholic attitudes toward local cultural traditions resulted from doctrinal policies designed at the Second Vatican Council, one might also consider the possibility that those policy shifts actually did not start in Rome and then radiate out to Africa and elsewhere.

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[10] Of course, Catholic history has not always lived up to this ideal, as the Church's efforts to suppress dissent, through inquisitions and investigations, amply attest. Yet this is what makes the Second Vatican Council so significant. As Adrian Hastings writes regarding Vatican II: "The Council's underlying emphases had been upon a greater freedom in the church, an admitted pluralism, a turning away from the uniformity not only of the Latin language but also of the very monolithic conception of 'the Latin Church', dominant in Pius XII's reign, to the fostering of a 'communion of churches' in which the particular characteristics of a 'local church', relating to a local culture, were to be encouraged rather than eliminated. All of this was as far away from the ultramontane presuppositions of many missionaries as it was from that of most of Rome's curial officials" (Hastings 1979, pp. 234–35).

Rather than the center unilaterally shaping the margins, it may have been the margins also (perhaps primarily) shaping the center. The Makhuwa did not just convert to Catholicism. They converted Catholicism to themselves.

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