Friesen have provided is a balanced and even-handed understanding of a still-evolving multicultural society in Canada’s western interior. Still, no work is perfect, and experts on particular ethnic groups will find many small points with which to quibble. Far more readers will be disappointed that so little coverage is accorded to one of the largest and most visible groups of “internal immigrants” to the cities of the Canadian prairies — the people of the First Nations. True, it can be argued that these people can hardly be considered as immigrants in their own country, but, given that both authors bring up the numerical importance of Aboriginal people moving to the cities from northern reserves, one would expect far more discussion of their place in western Canada’s multicultural urban milieu. However, while this is a serious omission, it does not detract from what is, on balance, a truly fine piece of work that will become required reading for all serious students, not just of Western Canadian, but of Canadian social history.

Jim Mochoruk
University of North Dakota


In Catholic Women of Congo-Brazzaville: Mothers and Sisters in Troubled Times, Phyllis M. Martin provides an alternative historical perspective of Congolese women’s social and spiritual experience from the late nineteenth century to the 1990s. The author places her primary focus on the Catholic women from the region of lower Congo that lies between Brazzaville and the Atlantic Ocean. In this work, Martin seeks to interweave “women’s experience as mothers and sisters, their movement into the church” into the writing of national histories, which are usually focused on male political and military leaders (p. 17).

The author begins her book with the arrival of French missionaries in the 1880s. The first obstacle the Holy Ghost Fathers and the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny encountered was an inability to recruit young women to missions and convents. The author explains Congolese families’ reluctance to send girls for Christian training in terms of the confrontation between local social practices and Christianity. Natural disaster and colonial conquest significantly reduced the population in Congo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Meanwhile, male labours were recruited or forced to work for European enterprises. In these circumstances, women and girls represented valuable human resources, over whom elder male members desired to maintain control.

More importantly, the social structure introduced in the new Christian missions subverted the traditional social order in equatorial Africa. The tradition through which mothers and elder women passed on “specialized knowledge relating to essential customs, rituals and prohibitions” regulating reproduction and motherhood to their daughters was known as Kumbi. In the Congolese world view, the
neglect of these traditions could “endanger the spiritual and social well-being of the whole society” (p. 22). Therefore, to send girls to Catholic missions meant to “alienate maternal responsibilities, endanger social health, and put future mothers at risk” (p. 20). Sending young women and girls to church training would mean the loss of generational continuity and social stability.

Despite these initial obstacles to conversion, by the interwar period, the first generation of Catholic Congolese women were recruited, and a community started to form. Chapter 4 deals with the spatial and temporal ways in which the Catholic community transformed African women. The church and the convent had become an “imagined community,” within which concepts of motherhood and sisterhood were redefined. The Catholic convent communities provided an arena for both European and Congolese sisters to define and construct social categories such as gender and race in colonial Congo-Brazzaville.

While colonial/postcolonial narratives are largely constructed around a masculine, confrontational, colonizers-versus-colonized binary, Martin’s approach avoids such a dichotomy and the tensions created by it. By focusing on the missionary nuns and Congolese religious women who were bonded together by Catholic religion and community life, Martin creates a new category, namely “Catholic women,” forged as religious and gender identity took precedence over racial or cultural identity.

The last two chapters of the book deal with the post-Second-World-War and postcolonial periods. As nationalist, anti-colonialist, and socialist politics became more important in Congo-Brazzaville, male involvement in religious affairs began to drop. While men withdrew from church attendance and other religious activities, women remained closely involved in the church. In addition, one of the author’s informants pointed out that, lacking proper schooling, the great majority of women did not understand Marxism and the socialist revolution, saying, “Prayers are more important than the revolution” (p. 150). While men dominated the economic and political realm, women retreated to the religious sphere. Being excluded from the national politics, women found in religion an alternative venue through which to maintain their agency and autonomy. To a great extent Catholic women’s groups became a prototype of civil society with a religious tone.

The best examples are women’s fraternities discussed in chapter 5. Women’s fraternities began to flourish in urban regions, particularly Brazzaville, during the troubled times of the 1950s and 1960s, as women’s response to personal suffering and social upheaval. Although the author asserts that women were “drawn together through the practice of their faith and ... spiritual empowerment” (p. 149), the evidence she supplies demonstrates that women were actually seeking protection from social and economic threats during postcolonial Congo-Brazzaville’s troubled political upheavals (p. 150). Rather than primarily devotional religious groups, women’s fraternities became strategies Congolese women employed to cope with the turmoil of postcolonial socialist realities.

The Church’s later efforts to regulate the fraternities make this point even more salient. The various women’s fraternities were constantly criticized by male bishops, clergy, and parish leaders. For instance, the Bishop of Ouesso commented...

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that the fraternities were “out of step with the rhythms of Congolese church life,” while a parish leader complained that “the fraternities started right but they have gone off the rails.” In another case, a graduate of the Catholic school said, “the clergy need to bring the fraternities into line” (pp. 163–164). Eventually in 1987, a detailed national fraternity constitution was revised and incorporated. It regulated a wide range of topics, from the fraternities’ responsibilities to conditions for admission, dues, relations to parishes and dioceses, and distribution of mutual aid (p. 164). Meanwhile, fraternity members’ husbands became the associations' most avid critics, complaining that fraternity activities took women away from home and family. These reforms, regulations, and critiques of urban women’s Catholic fraternities, more than merely religious, represent a struggle to redefine gender relations. Doubtless, the fraternities were founded on Congolese women’s religiosity, as the author points out, but one must not neglect the fact that the fraternities came into existence as a strategy for women to secure mutual support during economic and political disturbance. The fraternities became the places where Congolese women recast their role as women and asserted their autonomy and agency in the male-dominated political and religious realms.

The author utilizes a wide range of primary sources, including official reports and correspondence from missionaries, archives of four female congregations, and government archives in France and Congo. She also uses oral accounts from fraternity women, European and Congolese sisters, Congolese women in France, Congolese laity and clergy, as well as a number of European Catholic missionaries still working in or retired from Congo. Despite the promising and varied source material, the reader finds that the first four chapters of this study are based almost exclusively on the missionaries’ written accounts. Beginning with chapter 5, the author incorporates more diverse sources, ranging from interviews to oral accounts, into her study, and the African voice starts to emerge. However, this treatment left the impression that European missionaries and Africans were telling two separate, mutually independent stories.

Zhijun Ren


Nineteenth-century taverns evoke images of working class male sociability, if not working-class rowdiness — or worse. Did the 1837 rebellion in Upper Canada not start in a tavern? This slim book forces readers to reconsider this stereotype. The painting reproduced on the cover already provides a clue to the book’s main point: it depicts three well-dressed gentlemen (white trousers, vests, high crown hats) enjoying a drink in the yard of a very bucolic establishment overlooking a pretty bay, served by a respectable looking, but fashionably dressed, young woman. No rabble or rowdiness is evident in this 1849 “country tavern near Cobourg.”

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