The Production of Knowledge in and of Africa: A Review Essay

Esther E. Acolatse

What are the contributions of Africans to missionary activity on the continent? In what ways were the nineteenth- and twentieth-century missionaries pioneers in the field of modern science, from anthropology to linguistics, medicine, and zoology? Why were their reports, in occasional booklets or in monographs, the only source of knowledge about Africa available to the North Atlantic world? These and multiple other questions are addressed in this impressive volume. Eleven essays, framed by an introduction and conclusion, offer an opportunity to review the historical accounts of missionary work in Africa, reassess its important role in present-day academic disciplines and in the various methodological approaches to Africa, and perhaps attempt a reparation for the actions that have marginalized the contributions and agency of African peoples in the production of knowledge about themselves.

Perhaps nowhere are the above claims more evident than in chapters 3 and 8. The former, John Cinnamon’s treatment of fetishism and totemism, introduces readers to the life and work of “two Africanist missionaries,” Robert Nassau and Henri Trilles, and their insights and contributions to “anthropological knowledge production about African religious practices” (105). These insights clue us into the scientific debates of their day and show their continuing contemporary relevance for anthropological studies. They also underscore the invaluable role of African informants for fieldwork. These scientific observations, as we see in Harries’s chapter, “Natural Science and Naturvölker: Missionary Entomology and Botany,” make evident a striking similarity between the rudimentary scientific findings and reports of these earliest missionaries and those of the Africans themselves.

Likewise chapter 8, in which Walima T. Kalusa explores Christian medical discourse and praxis, deals a telling blow to the often erroneously held assumption about the supremacy of Western medicine to that of traditional African healing practices in the colonial outposts. His analysis shows that the relationship between the two was not as unambiguous as is often assumed, both then and even now, since Western physicians were sometimes compelled to employ traditional healing practices in their work (248). The coupling of Western medicine with Christianity no doubt contributed to the unfortunate situation, since Christianity aimed at eradicating any practices it envisaged as pegan, as the efforts to cure pneumonia and the epidemic of tropical ulcers purely through Western medicine indicate (254). In the turn to “think black” (262), a new, integrated approach sought to incorporate African traditional healing practices, a religious replication of British indirect rule in Africa that proved effective. The result undercut overt missionary aversion to aspects of African medicine and enabled the rise of a hybrid of African religious healing rituals couched in Christian parlance (263), which is still observable in many clinics and hospitals today. It is thus not uncommon to encounter doctors and nurses congregated near the nurses’ stations of the various floors for devotions that include prayers and singing before starting customary rounds. But what is further of prime importance—and a question that needs to be addressed but is not taken up in Kalusa’s essay—is how the myth of the dominance of Western medicine has perdured, especially in the cities. The paradox of the popularity of missionary medicine despite its inefficacy in treating diseases and offering healing, when a synthesis of the two modalities was perhaps the sure way to proceed then and now, continues to be an issue that plagues most of African health care delivery.

The above oft-repeated ideas about the ambivalent attitude toward African religiocultural ways gain additional clarity in Dmitri van den Bersselaar’s chapter, which is based on the work of an “unfashionable ethnographer” (136), as he calls him: the Anglican George Thomas Basden. Basden worked mainly among the Igbo of Nigeria, and van der Bersselaar’s portrayal of Basden’s shifting attitude toward the Igbo in tandem with Basden’s ambiguous feelings about “the disappearing Igbo tradition” (150) indicate the ongoing fine line between what was observed as supposedly savage customs, which he saw as needing eradication, and the customs and religiocultural identity markers that he thought could be retained. The question is whether Basden’s two-sided sentiment had any real possibility of realization then or now, given the missionary agenda and given that African religion and custom are integrally unified—they are a way of life and not simply a banal “performance” or acting out of specific rituals. Van der Bersselaar also points out that Basden took a stand against railroading the Igbo people into following the dictates of foreign government policy, asserting that only what the Africans chose for themselves would endure. This attitude toward the Igbo points to tensions in his relationship with the colonial administrative offices and no doubt was a cause for their unfavorable assessment of Basden’s work. In light of his above stances, it becomes difficult to unearth the reason for the facelessness of Basden’s African informants and his lack of attention to the clear ethnic distinctions of the various African peoples, despite years of living among the Igbo. Is van den Bersselaar’s own account perhaps a little ambiguous in its tone as well?

The following chapter by David Maxwell, “From Iconoclasm to Preservation,” with its turn to the more evangelical/Pentecostal missionaries and missionary activity, shows an aspect of missionary activity on the colonial frontier not often explored—namely, competitiveness between missionaries from various denominations, which could become antagonistic and perhaps work in the favor of the colonizing empires. Intermissionary squabbles and competition between Catholics and Protestants also reveal some of the hidden themes of dismissive attitudes toward the role of African informants in missionary
knowledge about Africa. The missionary of note in this essay is William Burton, whose aversion to aspects of African religion, which he saw as religious fraud, resulted in “numerous bonfire meetings,” (157) at which artifacts and other witchcraft paraphernalia were burned. Maxwell tells of Burton’s shift in attitude after a long period of immersion in Luba culture and study of their language, proverbs, and folklore. This shift, along with a more ready attention to cultural norms, provided the much-needed impetus for missionary contributions to the burgeoning field of African theology and religious studies (157). And while Burton seems to be marginalized from anthropological circles, which Maxwell seems not to care about (85), Burton’s insight into aspects of Luba culture, especially the role of the vernacular in reaching the people (the native evangelists were more able to reach the hearts of the people than were the white superintendents), is testimony to the role of the mother tongue in the propagation of the Gospel. This observation recalls Lamin Sanneh’s insight that translatability is at the heart of mission.

The importance of the mother tongue for propagation of the Gospel is further underscored by Erika Eichholzer’s essay, “Missionary Linguistics on the Gold Coast,” in which attention to learning of the vernacular, despite initial difficulties in learning a tonal language, had a huge payoff, as demonstrated in Johannes Christaller’s example with the Twi language among the Akan of Ghana. One needs to point out the drawback of choosing one dialect among several regional ones for purposes of missionary work, since it at least creates an unintended linguistic hierarchy among a group by making a particular dialect the lingua franca and to some extent frustrates the goal of hearing the Gospel in one’s own mother tongue. It is not coincidental that focus on the mother tongue and on learning it forged a unique bond between missionary and native. This chapter is the only one in which there is an acknowledged and almost mutual collaboration between natives and missionaries—between Daniel Asante and Johannes Dieterle and, later, Johann Christaller. Christaller’s contributions to linguistic endeavors were well noted in scholarly circles; he was “twice awarded the prestigious Prix Volney … by the Institut de France” for his work in building a foundation for the “future scientific study of West African languages” (97).

But to return to Maxwell’s chapter, we find there an uncovering of the conflictual nature and the distinctions between the Catholic missions and the newer Protestant enterprises in the colonies. Maxwell’s prime example in the chapter in this regard is the Belgian colonial enterprise. The Belgian colonial powers described the Protestant missions as “poor petit rentiers,” looking on them with suspicion as ones whose brand of missionary work “animated by zealous lay adepts had a tendency toward independence” (164). The rise of the various ethnically based African initiated churches, which were spearheaded by the Kimbanguist movement in the 1920s and now dot most of sub-Saharan Africa, confirms the kind of autonomy and a breakdown of the hegemonic Belgian state feared by the colonial masters. We have a very important testimony to what can be achieved when missionaries empower native converts if we consider the effort to follow what came to be known as the Venn principle in mission work.

In conclusion, this is a very important volume of essays. Together, they paint a rich picture of the mutual influence of Western mission work in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This collection aims to portray the mutual dependence between the European missionaries and the Africans in all spheres of endeavor. In this task alone, the volume has justified its existence. But perhaps beyond this, in reviving interest in the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century missionaries, in reconsidering “the understanding of the history of both human and natural science in Africa” (29), the essayists in this collection have unwittingly raised anew the question made famous by the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak: Can the subaltern (here, Africa) speak for herself and not merely through the medium of the missionary?

For good or ill (depending on one’s perspective), African ways of being and knowing continue to exist next to Western ones.
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