

## **Introduction : Missionaries and Ethnography**

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In a recent overview of missionaries and anthropology, Patrick Harries makes a number of points relevant to this issue of *LFM* on missionaries as ethnographers. Harries notes, for example, the obvious tensions between evangelization, which sought to effect radical changes in the cultural practices and worldview of the evangelized, and ethnography as a descriptive science.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, by the second half of the nineteenth century missionaries sought to reach a more scholarly, scientific audience and began to publish in the journals of geographical and anthropological societies.<sup>2</sup> Harries also calls attention to the relationship “between missionaries and metropolitan experts whereby men in the field, like collectors in the natural sciences, supplied the professionals at home with the evidence needed to classify and compare cultures....” Evolutionist “armchair anthropologists” could thus draw on these ethnographic samples and “remnants of earlier cultures,” to reconstruct “an earlier state of human existence.”<sup>3</sup>

The papers in this issue illustrate such broader processes. Father Wilhelm Schmidt, for example, organized ethnographic projects by which missionaries in Africa and Asia would furnish him with ethnographic data he could then use to found a Roman Catholic science of comparative ethnology.<sup>4</sup> Presbyterian Missionary Robert Nassau collaborated with

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Harries, “Anthropology,” in Norman Etherington (ed.), *Missions and Empire*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press (The Oxford History of the British Empire: Companion Series), 247.

<sup>2</sup> Harries, “Anthropology,” 239.

<sup>3</sup> Harries, “Anthropology,” 241. Of course, not all missionary ethnographers embraced evolutionism. Robert Nassau, for example, was a proponent of degradation theory. As opposed to the nineteenth-century evolutionists, such as Edward Burnett Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan, Nassau posited a fall, through a series of “unconscious degradations,” from monotheism to polytheism, animism, and eventually fetishism; Robert Hamill Nassau, *Fetichism in West Africa: Forty Years’ Observation of Native Customs and Superstitions* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 44-48.

<sup>4</sup> It may be useful here at the outset to call attention to the standard distinction within anthropology between “ethnography” and “ethnology.” In a brief discussion of the two terms, Peter Wyatt Wood defines ethnography as “the systematic description of a single contemporary culture, often through ethnographic fieldwork.” Ethnology, on the other hand, refers to “the attempt to develop rigorous and scientifically grounded explanations of cultural phenomena by comparing and contrasting many human cultures.” Frequently, of course, ethnographic description and analysis are undertaken with a view towards ethnological comparison and theorizing. As Wood notes, “The two concepts are often combined in anthropological writings

William Libbey, who taught Physical Geography and directed the Natural History Museum at Nassau's alma mater, Princeton University.<sup>5</sup>

Harries calls attention to the roles played by missionary ethnographers as “lumpers,” and “splitters.” The lumpers sought “to lump tribal peoples together into generic groups such as ‘the Kaffirs’ or ‘the Bantu.’”<sup>6</sup> Nassau's 1904 *Fetichism in West Africa* exemplifies this tendency by frequently dispensing with then already prevalent ethnic labels in favor of generic African fetish worshippers. Ray Phillips also lumped various African groups in Johannesburg together into urbanized Bantu. At the same time, of course, Nassau and many other missionaries contributed to the discursive construction of ethnicities through the writing of language primers, hymnals, catechisms, and the Bible in African languages. Harries notes that the splitters wrote in the “tribal studies” genre that increasingly came to dominate colonial African anthropology.<sup>7</sup> Among the missionary ethnographers treated here, Maurice Briault, who wrote largely on Fang people in Gabon, and André Raponda Walker, who assembled comparative lexicons, grammars, and annotated lists of cultural items among a range of Gabonese ethnic groups, best illustrate this tendency. For Raponda Walker, who served into the first decade of independence in Gabon, tribal or ethnic culture, knowledge, and history provided a vital source from which to construct national culture.

Anthropological disdain for missionary ethnography goes back at least as far as 1871 when British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (who nonetheless depended on amateur reports sent from the field) argued that missionaries were “so occupied in hating and despising the beliefs of the heathen,” that they always misrepresented native life.<sup>8</sup> The professionalization of anthropology had initially provided missionaries with publishing outlets and even teaching opportunities in colonial universities. “But within a short time they found themselves excluded from the network

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and they have a close and complex relationship”; Peter Wyatt Wood, “Ethnography and Ethnology,” in Thomas Barfield (ed.), *The Dictionary of Anthropology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 157.

<sup>5</sup> John M. Cinnamon, “Missionary Expertise, Social Science, and the Uses of Ethnographic Knowledge in Colonial Gabon.” *History in Africa* 33 (2006), 413-32.

<sup>6</sup> Harries, “Anthropology,” 245.

<sup>7</sup> Harries, “Anthropology,” 245.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Christopher Herbert, *Culture and Anomie: Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 152.

of interests that developed with the new discipline.”<sup>9</sup> Harries cites the efforts by leading anthropologists Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, and Isaac Shapera to exclude amateur practitioners from the emerging field of academic anthropology. This was increasingly the case after the 1920s when ethnographic fieldwork became the sine qua non of anthropology doctoral programs.<sup>10</sup>

By 1930, with the exception of Raponda Walker and Ray Phillips, the missionary ethnographers treated here had died or definitively left Africa. They therefore occupied the transitional space in which missionaries could still seek to reach both an audience of faithful funders back home and the scientific community. Briault, for example, had attended ethnology courses at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland while on furlough in 1904. There he learned the then dominant cultural evolutionary perspective that influenced his subsequent work. Raponda Walker, himself Gabonese, later collaborated with French ethnologist-botanist Roger Sillans to produce important works on ethnobotany and ritual practices.<sup>11</sup> Phillips, on the other hand, working in pre-apartheid Johannesburg, embraced the emerging fields of psychology and social work to protect African workers from what he saw as the vices and debauchery of urban life.

Harries concludes on a provocative note, positing that “the differences between missionary and academic anthropology were often more imagined than real and were often concerned with marking out territory rather than defining exclusive approaches.”<sup>12</sup> Of course, colonial missionary ethnographers continue to provide easy targets for contemporary anthropologists. According to Jean and John Comaroff, for example, nineteenth-century missionary “accounts of ‘native custom’” in South Africa fabricated “a synthetic savagery drawn from a standardized myth” that relied on tropes of racial inferiority, demasculinization, and “infantilization” of Africans.<sup>13</sup> Wyatt MacGaffey, who has written on the Kongo of Democratic Republic of the Congo since the 1960s, also challenges the anthropological authenticity of much missionary and amateur ethnography: “Works by

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<sup>9</sup> Harries, “Anthropology,” 248.

<sup>10</sup> Harries, “Anthropology,” 248, 255.

<sup>11</sup> André Raponda-Walker et Roger Sillans, *Les plantes utiles du Gabon* (Paris: Édition Paul Lechevalier, 1961) and *Rites et croyances des peuples du Gabon* (Paris : Présence Africaine, 1962, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> Harries, “Anthropology,” 258.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, Volume One (Chicago, 1991), 115-7.

missionaries, priests and amateur ethnographers dealing with African religious beliefs or rites should not necessarily be regarded as anthropological ...”<sup>14</sup>

Congolese philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe adopts a more critical position vis-à-vis the claims of anthropologists. He situates both Christian missions and Africanist anthropology within the colonial project and Western practices of knowledge production.<sup>15</sup> And while partly accepting anthropological critiques of missionary ethnography, he challenges anthropologists’ claims of ethnographic authority by calling attention to missionaries’ language fluency and long years in Africa. Mudimbe also contends that “amateurism has strongly contributed to a solid foundation of anthropology,”<sup>16</sup> an argument that makes sense in much of Africa where missionaries and other ethnographers often preceded professional anthropologists by decades.

The four case studies in this issue address the uneasy relationship among missionary ethnography, colonialism, and professional anthropology. Authors focus on specific colonial and political contexts—in Europe, Gabon, and South Africa—in which Europeans and Africans produced, used, and contested amateur ethnography and ethnographic knowledge.

An Vandenberghe’s article focuses on the efforts of German Catholic priest, Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954), to institutionalize scientific, Christian, ethnological and linguistic studies in Africa, Oceania, and South America. Above all, her article elucidates Schmidt’s adept diplomatic maneuvers as he sought to gain support from an often reluctant, “anti-modernist” Vatican (Holy See) under Pope Pius X (1903-1914). Although Schmidt himself never traveled outside Europe, his unflagging efforts to promote ethnographic research led to creation of the journal *Anthropos* in 1906 (still published a century later). In the early years of the journal Schmidt dealt skillfully and tactfully with his superiors in Rome who did not always share his commitment to scientific research or his Darwinian theories of physical evolution.

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<sup>14</sup> Wyatt MacGaffey, “African Ideology and Belief: A Survey,” *African Studies Review* 24:2/3 (1981), 265, cited in V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, IN, 1988), 65.

<sup>15</sup> Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*, 66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

In the 1920s under Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922) and especially his successor Pius XI (1922-1939), Schmidt found a more receptive and supportive attitude toward his efforts to make the Church a leading scientific authority. Pius XI looked favorably on *Anthropos*, and anthropology more generally, and even went so far as to provide support for data-gathering missions undertaken by Schmidt's students to Malaysia and the Philippines and annual Religious-Ethnological weeks. In 1927 Schmidt became inaugural president of the newly opened Ethnological-Missionary Museum in Rome and, in 1931, founded the Anthropos Institute in Vienna. As Vandenberghe points out, these openings coincided with a broader shift among Catholic missionaries toward greater appreciation of indigenous cultural and religious practices as entry points for evangelization. Although Schmidt himself was not a field ethnographer, he played a major role in the early twentieth century development of scientific missionary ethnography and ethnology.

The next two papers turn to specific Protestant and Catholic missionary ethnographers in Gabon and neighboring Rio Muni. John Cinnamon's paper looks selectively at the field experiences and ethnographic writings of US American Presbyterian, Robert Hamill Nassau (1835-1920), who worked in Spanish Guinea, Gabon, and coastal Cameroon from 1861 to 1906. Cinnamon examines multiple ethnographic approaches in Nassau's *Fetichism in West Africa* (1904): Nassau's claims to ethnographic authority, his partly successful efforts to see beyond mere superstition in African religious practices, his confrontations with men's initiation societies, his descriptions of everyday "fetish" use, and his recording of folktales. The folktale discussed here evokes a volatile imagined landscape that nonetheless resembles that of Central Africa's late nineteenth century hinterland characterized by new forms of violence, power, accumulation, and mobility.

Cinnamon then turns to Nassau's long-term relationship with the mission-educated Mpongwe woman, Anyentyuwe Fando, who helped to raise Nassau's motherless daughter and who also served as his key informant for a number of published works. Nassau's later years at the mission were marred by conflicts with his colleagues, in part over their accusations that he had had an affair with Anyentyuwe. In *Tales out of School*, examined here, Nassau appropriated Anyentyuwe's voice to paint an ethnographic portrait of everyday power relations in a girl's mission school in colonial Libreville, while leveling a thinly veiled critique of fellow missionaries' treatment of Africans. It is perhaps here rather than in his conventional railings against

“traditional” African religious practices that Nassau’s ethnography is most insightful.

Jeremy Rich looks comparatively at the French Roman Catholic missionary, Maurice Briault (1874-1953) and the first Gabonese Catholic priest, André Raponda Walker (1871-1968), each of whom produced an abundant ethnographic corpus. Briault, who had some training in the cultural evolutionary ethnology of his day, retained that perspective along with what Rich calls a conservative rural French ideal. Briault’s published accounts of his years in Gabon downplay the frustrations of the missionary encounter. Instead, his colorful anecdotes tend to reaffirm clichés of the benevolent, all-knowing missionary confronted by stylized African brutality. Rich turns to Briault’s unpublished diaries for more useful ethnographic examples having to do with inter-village disputes over women and colonial interventions. Rich also contends that Briault himself had learned the art of Fang bigman politics, which, along with backing from the colonial administration, allowed him to prevail in contests with Fang villagers.

Raponda Walker was ordained in 1899 and served in a variety of missions in the Gabonese interior where he learned multiple Gabonese languages and produced African-language catechisms, dictionaries, and grammars. Raponda Walker never wrote systematic ethnographies, but Rich is able to draw from a number of his published sources to provide ethnographic, historical, geographic, and linguistic glimpses of the Atlantic slave trade and its legacy on the Gabon coast. Rich concludes that even today, Raponda Walker’s writings serve as a repertoire from which postcolonial Gabonese can draw ethnographic materials that serve to forge a national cultural identity.

Finally, Iris Berger’s article centers on Ray Phillips (1889-1967), an American Board missionary who served in South Africa from 1918 until 1958. Phillips’s *The Bantu are Coming* (1930) and *The Bantu in the City* (1938) give ethnographic and sociological accounts of the move by rural South Africans to the industrial, mining, and commercial metropolis of Johannesburg. *The Bantu are Coming* juxtaposes moralizing depictions of superstitious, manipulative, “traditional” practices and the exploitation of women, on the one hand, and an urban ethnography of racial discrimination and mistreatment of blacks on the other. Berger notes that this earlier work was marked by “welfare paternalism” and a Social Gospel that preached individual salvation through social transformation in response to increasing

exploitation and inequality in the city. The later work, more objective and less moralistic in tone, focused on urban ethnography and the adjustment by Africans to modern industrial life. Phillips was also interested in the increasing movement of unattached women into the city.

In 1941, Phillips became director of the newly opened Jan Hofmeyr School that developed a paternalistic, apolitical curriculum to train African social workers who would work with the poor and strengthen urban families without directly challenging the racial status quo. In the last part of her article, Berger explores a new shift in the social sciences during the 1950s whereby psychologized and medicalized discourses were increasingly invoked to explain “family breakdown” in Johannesburg. By then, as Phillips neared the end of his career, the mechanisms of the apartheid system were already being put in place. Deeply disturbed by apartheid and its dire implications for the future of South Africa, Phillips retained both his complex understanding of the injustices of the system and his reluctance to embrace political solutions.

To date, the field of missionary ethnography remains largely neglected, in part because of its long exclusion from academic anthropology. Yet, as historian Helen Tilley argues, “histories of anthropology should not be limited to theoretical and methodological developments in the academy.”<sup>17</sup> The four papers presented here suggest several alternative histories of anthropology: the politics of ethnological knowledge production in the Holy See; face-to-face ethnographic encounters, power struggles, and appropriations in the villages and mission stations of colonial Gabon; and the moral topography of urbanization, racial inequality, and social work in Johannesburg in the years before Apartheid.

JOHN M. CINNAMON & WENDY URBAN-MEAD

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<sup>17</sup> Helen Tilley, “Introduction: Africa, Imperialism, and Anthropology,” in Helen Tilley with Robert J. Gordon (eds.), *Ordering Africa: Anthropology, European Imperialism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Manchester, UK: University of Manchester Press, forthcoming).