

The Epistemology of Colonial Rule: Science, Religion, and Systems of Meaning in Northern Rhodesia

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To say that misconception dogged the British colonial project in Africa is an understatement of the highest degree. Much of the European approach to managing colonial holdings was influenced by their conceptions of culture, religion, and people, formed in environments vastly different from what they experienced in Africa. A critical aspect of the colonial project, especially in its early years, was the dissemination of European religious thought, chiefly Christianity. Christian notions of what religion should consist of were transposed onto the African people who composed the would-be subjects. The developing fields of anthropology and ethnography contributed to the treatment of the African as an object to be observed. Both science and religion served colonial interests. This intersection of science and religion created the atmosphere in which the first depictions of African religions emerged, which were compared directly to European religion and examined by the burgeoning scientific study of culture. By placing this tripartite interaction in terms of the models of Ian Barbour, a foundational scholar in the field of science and religion dynamics. The aim of this exercise is to demonstrate how science and religion, filtered through the political landscape of their time, can work together in unexpected ways, leading to an obscuration of the object they are attempting to understand.

Knowing an Englishman's Africa

The first reports by the English on the nature of African people, from methods of harvest to religious practices, were confused by the European's presumption of superiority and ignorance. The period with which this paper is concerned covers the first real attempt by British imperial officials to solidify colonial rule in the territory of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). The English had no way of escaping the preconceptions that they brought into each new interaction with African peoples. As such, European conceptions of Africans were shaped greatly by the notions they had received in the metropole about other cultures. The historical landscape of European colonialism in Africa is clouded to this day by one sided accounts of

historical events, particularly in the late 1800s.¹ The consolidation of colonial rule in Africa coincided with the professionalization of the study of humans and their culture, but this was of little use to the first Englishmen of to venture into the new claimed colonial territories in Northern Rhodesia. The growing influence of scientific ways of knowing the world created friction in the colonial system of gathering knowledge about African people. Disciplines such as comparative religion and ethnography sought to gather data in a manner which we today would recognize as typically scientific, offering detached and “unbiased” accounts of other cultures, to be whisked far away and compiled by “experts.” By the 1930s, this “scientific” model of knowing Africa was establishing itself with some success, but the predecessor to this system will be our subject.² In the first decade of the twentieth century, Englishmen with secondary school education found themselves woefully unequipped to act as reliable observers of African life. As Diana Jeater, a professor of African history at the University of Liverpool put it:

[European] models of African society consistently drew on ideas from their European cultural backgrounds. They perceived Africans through many different lenses—the Bible, the classics, popular fiction, popular history, and social/ethnographic theory. Most of these lenses distorted rather than clarified their view of the African people in front of their eyes. In the 1890s, awash with ignorance about the peoples around them, whites flailed around for parallels and metaphors that would both explain what they saw and justify what they did.³

Missionaries and Native Commissioners (NCs) were among the colonials who spent the greatest deal of time observing Africans going about their daily lives. A critical skill of the observer was mastery of the local language.⁴ The British colonials fit the African people into the frameworks of comparative religion (a now defunct scholarly field), anthropological, and ethnographic theory they were privy to, as well as popular “science” which was consumed by fashionable and important Englishmen. Individual observers across British colonial Africa formulated their own theories about the people they observed, they made comparisons to other cultures across history and drew their own conclusions. This process served to further mystify the African and allowed the colonial observer to hold personal dominion over “very

¹ Dennis Laumann, *Colonial Africa: 1884-1994*, second (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 12.

² Diana Jeater, “Imagining Africans: Scholarship, Fantasy, and Science in Colonial Administration, 1920s Southern Rhodesia,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 38, no. 1 (2005): 21-22.

³ Jeater, “Imagining Africans,” 1.

⁴ Jeater, “Imagining Africans,” 21-22.

esoteric and specialized knowledge.”⁵ In essence, colonial political structures in the early twentieth century rule gave rise to self-proclaimed experts on African culture, and they were able to do so precisely because of the lack of reliable sources which were necessary to administer colonial holdings. The English “native experts” during this period grew to rely on the mysterious character that African’s possessed in the English mind. This state of affairs suggests two critical aspects of British colonial rule in the early twentieth century. The first is that, for many Africans, especially outside of urban areas, the impact of colonial rule was limited at this time. The second, irreconcilable without the first, is that the European notions of what Africans were like had little bearing on African lives. Africans who lived in rural villages were rarely in contact with colonial officials, and despite how the European observers described them, their lives were largely unimpacted.

Case Study: E.W. Smith, Science, and Religion

The religious and scientific material which led these “native experts” to draw the conclusions they did varied widely. This material represented a European cultural consensus about its relationship to other cultures, revealed via scientific and religious channels. The aforementioned English interpretation of African culture is a product of the perceived relationship between the colonial culture and its subject, a process Henk van Rinsum, an anthropologist at Utrecht University describes as ‘translation.’⁶ Van Rinsum defines ‘translation’ as, “the process through which the system of meaning of the culture of “the Other” is translated and interpreted in terms of the dominating system of meaning.”⁷ Van Rinsum’s model is concerned specifically with the interaction between European and African (Ila) religious thought in this case, since the specific context of his paper concerns rural African people in Northern Rhodesia.⁸ The result of the translation process is based upon the contextualization which the observer presents, but also their own influences. For many colonial ‘native experts’, as noted by Jeater, this consisted of a variety of material including scripture, popular science books, and their education.⁹

⁵ Jeater, “Imagining Africans,” 21.

⁶ Van Rinsum, “Raw Material,” 353.

⁷ Van Rinsum, “Raw Material,” 353.

⁸ Van Rinsum, “Raw Material,” 351.

⁹ Jeater, “Imagining Africans,” 1.

The English observers who claimed special access to the secrets of African culture often used scripture to periodize their object¹⁰ Van Rinsum's article deals specifically with the issue of constructing African religion in the European mind. Van Rinsum describes how English missionaries, who provided the first ethnographic profiles of African religion, transpose ideas about Christian religion onto their subject. The fact that the purpose of missionaries was to produce converts created obstacles as they attempted to describe the religion of their would-be converts. Van Rinsum's subject is an ethnography of the Ila speaking peoples of Northern Rhodesia, written by an English missionary named Edwin Smith and based on his experiences there in the 1900s and early 1910s. In an excerpt from Smith's work, he describes the Ila's hierarchy of spiritual beings: "The *mizhimo* are near to men: they are of the same nature, know human life from the inside, realize the wants of men; Leza on the other hand, is remote and takes little or no cognizance of the affairs of individuals."¹¹ Van Rinsum notes that later twentieth century scholars have taken issue with such characterizations of the structure of African religions as being the product not of careful observation, as was claimed, but the translation of one system of meaning into another.¹² Smith, as we shall see, continues to strive to better understand the African people despite all the odds stacked against him.

The missionary turned ethnographer is also a key element of this story, as it is emblematic of the concordance between the religious mission in British colonial Africa and the scientific study of its people. Colonial missionary writing offers an even more striking depiction of the Ila people, and in this context, Smith gives much more attention to an aesthetic, emotional depiction of African life. Smith describes "witchcraft, infanticide, slave-trading" and the lack of urban areas or stone buildings and roads: "Everything in nature is free. The country is sombre. The beauty of the people is found in their disfigurement... Human life has little value. Murders create no surprise, but are taken as ordinary events of daily life."¹³ Seemingly, then, a land of immorality and indifference, depicted as implicitly opposed to European countries with their extensive urbanization and laws. Smith's depiction is full of pity, seemingly for himself as well as the land and people of Africa. Van Rinsum suggests Smith's alienation from the people is reflected in these quotations, that he is suffering both from a failure to understand the social norms of his environment, and as such is painfully

¹⁰ Jeater, "Imagining Africans," 9.

¹¹ Van Rinsum, "Raw Material," 358.

¹² Van Rinsum, "Raw Material," 358.

¹³ Van Rinsum, "Raw Material," 359.

separate from it.¹⁴ This suggests a critical way in which the separation between the subject (Smith in this case) and his own familiar environment affects his perception. Despite the overtly white-supremacist overtones of Smith's writings, it is a predicament which one can empathize with. Smith, however, envisioned a future where Africans were gradually incorporated into his own religious belief system.¹⁵ This is made possible, in the broader context of historicization of African people, by the arrival of Europeans, with whose presence begins the history of the continent in the European mind.

In his conclusion, Van Rinsum asserts that Smith's missionary writing and his explicitly ethnographic work should be considered as part of the latter camp, an assessment with which the author agrees. Furthermore, the indistinct nature of Smith's missionary work and his work under the guise of science demonstrates the connection between these two ways of knowing in this context. The personal conceptions of scriptural and scientific truth espoused by Smith combine to translate one culture through the perception of another, a specific interaction which was a pioneer in the field of European discourse on African Traditional Religion. The presence of Christian thematic elements in Smith's assessment of the Ila religion reflects this. While this fact complicates contemporary understanding of Ila religiosity and has implications for African Traditional Religion more broadly, it should be noted that it was not his intention to present inaccuracies. Smith was however fully engaged with the project of Christianizing the Ila people and spoke of it in his missionary writings.¹⁶ One particularly striking example of the interplay between the local religious traditions among the Ila and Christian theology comes from a man named Mupumani who, "refers to a visit to the supernatural world where he met Mulengashika, Founder of Custom, a name applied to God. He [Mulengashika] wants Mupumani to bring a message to his people."¹⁷ The message, according to a report written by a colleague of Smith's, consisted of the cessation of animal sacrifice and "'Ku Bomba': they should humble themselves;" a message consistent with missionary teachings.¹⁸ Smith appears to have believed it too, since he was sure God would be more than capable of sending a messenger in such a way, and he was able to organize a service

¹⁴ Van Rinsum, "Raw Material," 361.

¹⁵ Van Rinsum, "Raw Material," 361.

¹⁶ Van Rinsum, "Raw Material," 365.

¹⁷ Van Rinsum, "Raw Material," 363.

¹⁸ Van Rinsum, "Raw Material," 363.

because of the prophet, Mupumani.¹⁹ Smith heralded these events as a great victory, though Mupumani was eventually imprisoned by the Native Commissioner.²⁰ Van Rinsum notes that Smith again seems to take this event fully within the realm of Christian thought, despite the prophet Mupumani's clear connection to his own religious customs.²¹ The religious life of the Ila people, however, was changed for Smith. They had become connected to his own tradition, a fact which reflects both Smith's own changing understanding of his subject and the delicate interplay between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. These facts are significant because they continue to reflect the intertwined nature of science and religion. Smith, a man who serves as both a foundational anthropologist despite his faults and a key figure in the relationship between Christianity and the local religious beliefs of the Ila people. Africans were akin to the tribes of Israel, caught outside of the progression of history, now the arrival of Christianity heralded change for the better, at least in the eyes of an observer such as Smith.

Together in Deception?

It is critical to note that the interactions between science and religion in the African colonial context became more strongly defined as the twentieth century progressed. The period between Smith's arrival in Africa in 1898 and his departure in 1915 represents the first cadre of British people in this region of Africa who attempted to govern in any meaningful way. Their experiences shaped the next phase of colonial expansion during the 1920s, during which in many places European-style economies were created and control over land rights was solidified in the interest of white settlers, especially in the region of Northern Rhodesia. The ethnographies, studies of comparative religion and histories of this period were almost exclusively based on European preconceptions of African people and culture; compared to the common conception of science, these were akin to paint-by-numbers – the outline already exists before work has begun. No individual can truly escape their environment, however this paper attempts to show how the lineage and influences of science and religion in the British colonial context led to similar misconceptions about their subjects, and to do so the context of these early missionaries and NCs is critical.

The shared lineage of science and religion is demonstrated by the aforementioned analogies of scriptural history. This is evidenced by the NC's idea that African people

¹⁹ Van Rinsum, "Raw Material," 364.

²⁰ Van Rinsum, "Raw Material," 365.

²¹ Van Rinsum, "Raw Material," 365.

represented a relic from a bygone age, so far removed from the histories of European countries that they fit among the Biblical era, or that they were analogous to the Britons at the time of the Roman arrival in England.²² The English mystified Africans using the analogies and comparisons available to them, a process which is broadly responsible for the failure of the colonial project; a fact which reveals the internal contradictions of colonialism itself. Of Ian Barbour's quadripartite model of science and religion relationships (conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration), the most prevalent model of interaction is dialogue.²³ Although the Bible was often used to draw parallels, an historical example of peoples in a state of development which to the Europeans resembled the Africa they saw, there is not significant evidence that they took this to mean that the Bible itself represented literal history. Further, the historical period that Africans best fit varied as previously mentioned.²⁴ This view was supported by popular science of the time as well, such as J.G. Frazer's *Golden Bough*, a book that Jeater notes was often commonly requested from the chief NC's library.²⁵ Smith and others so dedicated, who were doing their best to create analogies and make inferences based upon available information, *The Golden Bough* contained only references to others fieldwork, a fact which presents a certain irony given its popularity among those same men on the ground.²⁶ Victor Kumar, an assistant professor at Boston University, describes Frazer's work of comparative religion as, "weighed down with internal inconsistencies and analytical challenges, not the least of which is the relation between science and myth... Frazer blurs the lines between magic and science as well as his work and his material... however, there is talk of the sharp demarcation between hypothesis and fact."²⁷ Frazer offers the promise of a rational approach to the deep confusion and unfamiliarity of African cultures faced by the British as they attempted to make sense of Africa. Frazer influenced the field of anthropology cyclically, essentially appealing to, "extraordinary confidence in the difference between truth and error provides relief to readers hoping to emerge from the darkness of their own superstitions into the light of reason."²⁸ Frazer's popularity reveals the aspiration of the colonial project to

²² Jeater, "Imagining Africans," 11-12.

²³ Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*, Revised (Cambridge: International Society for Science and Religion, 2007), 90.

²⁴ Jeater, "Imagining Africans," 11-12.

²⁵ Jeater, "Imagining Africans," 16.

²⁶ Victor Kumar, "To Walk alongside Myth, Magic, and Mind in the Golden Bough," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 2 (2016): 240.

²⁷ Kumar, "Myth, Magic, and Mind," 243.

²⁸ Kumar, "Myth, Magic, and Mind," 247.

reason, simultaneously describing a cycle of essentially repurposing its own false impressions into new interactions in Africa. These circuitous misconceptions about African people fueled the mystical character of the African in English minds.

Even those who, like Smith, were able to work towards demystifying African people through their own personal identification with increasingly more intimate aspects of their cultures, change was slow. Works such as Frazer's *Golden Bough*, which actively provided paradoxes while assuring its reader of their own ability to distinguish truth while actively obscuring it all but ensured these conclusions.²⁹ Amid this confused attempt at scientific study of human beings, the follies of early comparative religion, and anthropology, the interaction of science and religion occurred in a particularly interesting way. That is to say, neither system of knowing was able to effectively avoid the pitfalls of widespread overconfidence in their ability, and the self-assuredness of their application. Both scientific and religious thought were ultimately dogged by the same misconceptions, and while their shared heritage is unquestionably present, their ability to adapt to new systems of meaning is demonstrably weak in the colonial context.³⁰ Perhaps surprisingly for some, the ability for religion to break through and make contact between disparate systems of meaning seemed to show more promise. Of course, the examples used in this paper are limited to a single, narrow cultural window: Anglican Christianity and a single localized instance of African Traditional Religion. However, the overarching theme of cultural translation left both science and religion reeling from their lack of context. The interaction between scientific and religious thought in this context stands as a testament to the dangers of overconfidence in general ability, even for two of the most powerful ways of knowing the world that humanity has ever devised.

²⁹ James George Frazer and Robert Fraser, *Golden Bough* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 196-7.

³⁰ Barbour, "Religion and Science," 90-91.

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