

“DON’T USE AFRICANS AS YOUR EXCUSE”:

Problems in the Study of Missions and Christianity in (Southern) Africa

The role of Christian missionaries in the shaping of modern Africa is often controversial and open to a wide variety of opinions in the general field of African Studies. The missionary endeavour by its very nature is about a judgement, a judgement that the message being carried is the truth and that everyone has the right to hear it. For non-religious scholars in secular academic institutions, especially in this so-called post-modern era, such a claim to a single universal truth can easily provoke hostility. In light of this widespread opposition, Christian missionaries have been implicated in participating in all sorts of evils throughout the continent. For the extreme critics, Christian missions was the worst form of colonialism because, “Missionaries invariably aimed at overall changes in the beliefs and actions of native peoples, at colonization of heart and mind as well as body.”¹ Reflecting on the contentiousness of the study of missions in Africa and how fairly the movement is judged, Melville Herskovitz once wrote, “...there is perhaps no aspect of the African experience that has been analyzed with less objectivity than the Christian missionary effort.”²

In Southern Africa with its large white settler population and all the related racial dynamics, the controversial nature of missions is exacerbated. Here, white missionaries immediately became part of the racial hierarchy. Furthermore, as missionaries could stay for as long as they desired as

¹ Thomas Beidelman, *Colonial Evangelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 6.

² Quoted in Beidelman, 7.

settlers, they could work with more of a sense of permanence to their work than would missionaries in other parts of Africa where settlement was not allowed.³ This paper is a discussion of Christian missions and Christianity in Africa, focusing mostly on the Northern Cape region in the 1800's, and particularly on *Of Revelation and Revolution Volume I* by Jean and John Comaroff. I wish to show how wrong this widely respected book is on many counts and to suggest some of the reasons for the Comaroffs' mistakes. I will also use the book to describe wider shortcomings within the study of missionaries and Christianity in African History and your responses to this paper as a way to test some of my own ideas on the subject.

Degrading Conversion

Of Revelation and Revolution is a study of the processes that led to profound cultural change, using the Southern Tswana, a political creation here enshrined by the Comaroffs, as a case study. The major question they set out to answer is, "How, precisely, is consciousness made and remade?"⁴ The agents of this change in consciousness, according to the Comaroffs, were predominantly nonconformist Christian missionaries whose aim, like other colonizers, "...has been to colonize their [the colonized] consciousness with the axioms and aesthetics of an alien culture."⁵ Whether or not missionaries really were agents of colonialism is itself an issue of debate, but the bigger problem with such an assertion is how the Comaroffs have "...reinvent[ed] religious change as a struggle over

³ Besides not being allowed to settle, a high percentage of missionaries in tropical Africa died from malaria, making long term missionary commitments difficult. According to Henry Venn, the Secretary of the Church Missionary Society in the mid-1800s, the aim of Christian missions was to transfer the work to an indigenous church as soon as possible, what he "... vividly referred to as the 'euthanasia' of missions." Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 64.

⁴ Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa Volume I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), xi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

hegemony,” as Elizabeth Elbourne so succinctly put it.⁶ Although some missionaries did have personal agendas and were after personal power, the overall aim of conversion to Christianity is not about power, it is about faith, something even religious scholars have difficulty understanding because conversion is by nature not rational or empirical and is therefore difficult to analyze. Elbourne also believes the Comaroffs devalued conversion too much and reduced the process “... to a symbolic field of struggle over capitalism.”⁷ She goes on to write, “It is clear the Comaroffs think the Tswana shouldn’t have converted, but it isn’t clear why they actually did.”⁸ To write an entire book based on a misreading or misunderstanding of something so personal and unquantifiable as conversion can easily lead to inaccurate accusations and conclusions.

Relativity and Static Cultures

Of Revelation and Revolution is not about the Tswana, it is really not about missionaries, and it is definitely not about Christianity, except if you accept the Comaroff’s definition of these: the Tswana as a creation of the colonization of their consciousness by missionaries, missionaries as “... among the earliest footsoldiers of British colonialism...”,⁹ and Christianity as a religion with a “... paternalistic deity... the fountainhead and guardian of a highly rationalized, universalist cosmology.”¹⁰

From my perspective as a believer, this book is little more than a cultural relativistic diatribe against Christianity in Africa in which any Tswana who calls him or herself a Tswana should be seen as a dupe, and any Tswana who is a Christian as a complete fool. Their accusations against the

⁶ Elizabeth Elbourne, “Colonialism, Conversion and Cultural Change: Shifting Paradigms of Religious Interaction in South African History,” Unpublished paper, Sept. 1995, 2. This paper written for a conference celebrating the 20th anniversary of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* is a very honest and direct critique of *Of Revelation and Revolution*. Unfortunately, it was never published.

⁷ Elbourne, 13.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Comaroffs, xi.

foreign missionaries who came to spread the gospel among the Tswana are varied and include digging wells, affirming the value of Tswana culture through translation,¹¹ providing opportunities for Tswana to be educated, giving hope to the destitute and equality to women, protecting a Tswana thief from a harsh death sentence, and protecting the Tswana from Boer settlers and the far reaching grasp of Cecil Rhodes. The basis of their judgement is that these intrusions all played a part in destroying the traditional Tswana way of life, a way of life which, according to the Comaroffs, was not really anything at all since the Tswana are a creation who never previously had a system of practices. The missionaries, in Comaroffs' eyes, through everything they did good and bad, simultaneously created and destroyed the Tswana and their traditions.¹²

The Comaroffs are difficult to argue with. Their apparent knowledge of the Tswana and of the anthropological craft is intimidating while their arguments are seemingly impregnable because of their intellectually seductive writing style. As Elizabeth Elbourne honestly pointed out in her own critique of the book, "I have found it difficult to be certain of my critique of this intelligent and multi-faceted book."¹³ Rather than take them on directly on their own terms, one can begin the critique by breaking down the underlying perspective from which they come – cultural relativism, what "...most modern anthropologists are also made to learn."¹⁴ From this viewpoint, anything the

¹⁰ Ibid., 156.

¹¹ For some reason, the Comaroffs completely ignored Lamin Sanneh's seminal work on missions and translation published two years before *Volume I*. Sanneh describes the particular case of Setswana translation as reflecting the profound respect Moffat, Livingstone and others had for Tswana culture, rather than as a means to dominate them. See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 106-108.

¹² Comaroffs, 212.

¹³ Elbourne, 12.

¹⁴ Comaroffs, 246. They even imply that Africans are inherently relativistic, a huge and inaccurate generalization. True, African Traditional Religions do not have universalistic aspirations, but this does not mean that Africans are traditionally wholeheartedly non judgemental of the cultural practices of the 'other'. Comaroffs, 245.

missionaries did, positive or negative, was intrusive and impermissible as it was a judgement against another culture.

Taken to its logical conclusion, cultural relativism is an extremely dangerous philosophy which prevents any cultural judgements on others, making the slave trade, the Holocaust, and colonialism itself acceptable offshoots of the cultural traditions that produced them. The Comaroffs, however, are guilty of inconsistency just as their missionary villains were because they have made a cultural judgement on the motives of the missionaries whose own culture and religion drove them to take the gospel of Christ all over the world. By judging Christian evangelism as wrong, the Comaroffs are no longer true to their relativistic tendencies, which should embrace missionary intrusions as culturally acceptable. Missions, then, by its very nature causes cultural relativism to implode on itself. This is perhaps why the Comaroffs are so critical of the missionary endeavour – because it makes them recognize that the philosophy behind their methodology is incoherent.

Furthermore, they also come from the perspective that cultural change or interference of any kind is wrong, that the pre-Tswana Tswana were some how more perfect and pristine. As Nicholas Thomas points out in *Colonialism's Culture*, this idea that indigenous life was somehow superior than what it was replaced with (or augmented by) through interaction with Europeans is widespread. From this standpoint, "... the primitive spirituality..." of Native Americans, Africans, and Aboriginal Australians all have some kind of "... homogenous essence..." and they all become the same beings, all perfectly in tune with nature.¹⁵ Anyone who is hybridized, like the Comaroffs' Christian Tswana, becomes inauthentic.¹⁶ Culture is by nature dynamic and changing, always being challenged from within and without. A culture which does not change, as the Comaroffs seem to think would be best for their beloved Tswana, becomes a fossilized museum relic as do Christian communities without a

missionary impulse – for example the Egyptian Coptic Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the ancient Syriac Church of India.

Monolithic Missionaries and Invisible Africans

From my perspective as an apprentice historian, the biggest problem with the Comaroffs' approach is that they give the missionaries far too much credit for their involvement with the Tswana while at the same time giving almost no agency to the Tswana themselves. This view of the missionary endeavour as being a monolithic and omnipotent force is similar to the popular view of the entire colonial enterprise. As Nicholas Thomas correctly points out, "... such perceptions frequently exaggerate colonial [for the Comaroffs, missionary] power, diminishing the extent to which colonial histories were shaped by indigenous resistance and accommodation."¹⁷ The Tswana who were so transformed through the process are rarely mentioned, the real depth of the transformation hardly investigated.

In contrast, Paul Landau's *The Realm of the Word* tells a story of another portion of the Tswana people – the Ngwato – and how their king Khama created a kingdom by using London Missionary Society missionaries and the church for his own ends to establish a 'realm of the word'.¹⁸ Although this is somewhat of a unique top-down example of the way Christianity was spread in Africa, the agency of the Africans themselves in the spread of the gospel is not. What Landau argues as true for BaTswana evangelists, that "... they were more important to the spread of Christianity than missionaries,"¹⁹ is a fact that the Comaroffs completely ignore. From their reading of the

¹⁵ Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁷ Thomas, 15.

¹⁸ If I understand it correctly, the Ngwato are considered a sub-section of the wider Sotho-Tswana ethnic classification.

¹⁹ Paul Landau, *The Realm of the Word* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1995), 131.

Christianization process, the only part Africans themselves played was through missionaries' "...reliance on African carriage..."²⁰ In the end the Comaroffs have glorified the role of the missionaries beyond what even an ardent apologist for Christian missions might dare!

Elizabeth Elbourne also argues that the Comaroffs gave the missionaries far too much credit. Elbourne writes, "Missionaries were undeniably enthusiastic proponents of an imagined utopian capitalism, but it is remarkable how far groups which were not missionized ended up adopting similar 'capitalistic' forms. Did the missionaries truly have the profound influence which they so fondly imagined?"²¹ Both the Comaroffs and the missionaries themselves were far more optimistic about what the missionaries had accomplished than they should have been. Perhaps by using missionary sources to the extent they did, the Comaroffs were misled into believing that it was indeed the missionaries who accomplished all these things, without giving proper credit elsewhere. As has been the case many times earlier in the semester, we must question the sources. Do the journals, letters, and memoirs of foreigners on a complex utopian mission ever tell the whole story? Did they not record the extent of the 'native' involvement in the spread of Christianity because of the threat it posed to their own usefulness, and perhaps their own financial support from abroad? Even today, missionary letters and reports are embellished, because telling the often mundane truth of day to day mission work to one's supporters might not sound exciting enough to keep them interested. Being completely honest about the involvement of Africans themselves in the evangelization process might push financial support in new directions in which each 'evangelical dollar' goes much further and in which 'expensive' foreign missionaries lose out to local evangelists.²²

²⁰ Ibid., 132, footnote 5.

²¹ Elbourne, 24.

²² Rev. Dauda Maigari, the director of the Nigerian based Evangelical Missionary Society's 1,200 missionaries, said that one foreign missionary 'costs' as much as 30 Nigerian missionaries. Interview with the author 17 August, 1998 in Jos, Nigeria.

This non-recognition of African agency in the spread of Christianity on the continent is not unique to the Comaroffs, but is rather a widespread problem even among missiologists.²³ As Landau points out in a manner which simultaneously glorifies and critiques *Of Revelation and Revolution*, “The most important and theoretically sophisticated contribution to our current understanding of southern African missions, for example, contains virtually nothing on African evangelists.”²⁴ He adds, “Southern African Christians therefore have not been credited with the same autonomy and influence in the domain of everyday religious life granted to Europeans.”²⁵ This key involvement of Africans themselves in the missionary endeavour is a fact which, if properly appreciated, should lead scholars to take another look at the alleged coercive and culturally imperialistic nature of the history of Christianity in Africa. It is an entire arena of African History that merits urgent attention, a history of Africans themselves making a multicultural world religion their own.²⁶

The Demise of Christendom and the Rise of Khama

In a forthcoming book, Lamin Sanneh argues that Christianity among the slaves of the thirteen colonies/the United States brought an end to the age-old notion *CUIUS REGIO EIUS RELIGIO* – ‘tell me your ruler, and I will tell you your religion’. This was the basis of Christendom, that one’s religion was defined by that of their ruler – religion was territorial. This was the approach taken in all the early mission attempts along the West African coast – the missionaries focused on

²³ In the Overseas Ministries Studies Center’s *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, only 5% of the 2,400 biographical sketches of those important to the spread and leadership of Christianity world wide since Christ are about Christians from the nonwestern world. King Khama did make the cut. See Gerald Anderson, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1998).

²⁴ Landau, 132.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jonathan Bonk, the Associate Director of the Overseas Ministries Studies Center in New Haven is in the preliminary stages of a massive project to collect the biographies of the thousands of African evangelists and missionaries who were the real driving force behind the spread of Christianity on the continent. This is at least a start in alleviating this academic shortcoming.

converting the ruler since the ruler's conversion would logically entail the conversion of all the ruled. American slave Christianity did not fit this pattern, as their brand of Christianity was a means of asserting their independence from their masters. This new view of Christianity in which the religion of ones ruler did not matter was transported into white evangelical Christianity through the abolition movement and to Africa through African-American ex-slaves who settled in Sierra Leone and Liberia. These settlers and the recaptives who joined them transformed the missionary movement by focusing on those at the bottom of the society and ignoring the chiefs whose power rested largely on the slaves they owned and the slave trade they profited from. Christianity brought liberation and challenged the power of these chiefs, making the missionary movement inherently antislavery as well as antistructure.²⁷

By the time the missionaries written of by the Comaroffs and Landau arrived in Southern Africa, Christendom was no more. Territoriality and the religion of one's ruler decided nothing. Thus, missionaries were free to minister to the dispossessed and rejected at the bottom of society instead of the chiefs. Obviously, for Comaroffs' Southern Tswana chiefs, this was a threat to their power. Comaroffs, however, read this as missionaries destroying the power structure to open the way for colonial conquest, a sign that the motives of the church and the state were the same – that Christendom was alive and well. Landau's Khama, however, adapted Christian symbols and the church for his own use, reestablishing Christendom for a brief and unusual period in southern Africa.

Khama ruled the BaNgwato from the second half of the nineteenth century until his death in 1923. Khama was a Christian ruler who worked with missionaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS) as the controlling partner in the effort to spread the gospel and to establish a Christian realm.

²⁷ *The American Factor in West African Christianity: 1770-1890: A Study in Antislavery and Antistructure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming), passim. This is also the subject of

It was Khama who decided which missionaries should stay or go, and it was Khama himself who often paid for the construction of church buildings. Missionary church laws such as rules against drinking became BaNgwato laws. Breaking church rules was the same as breaking 'national' laws. Preaching for or converting into another Christian denomination was also illegal, and Christians and evangelists from outside the LMS churches were often harassed and persecuted – even Anglicans. As LMS missionaries and Tswana evangelists spread Christianity, so too was Khama's kingdom spread.

The Comaroffs claim that, "...it [the book] is concerned ultimately with processes that occurred throughout the subcontinent – and indeed, in some form, throughout much of the nonwestern world."²⁸ These processes of the colonization of the nonwestern consciousness are so widely applicable that north of the Southern Tswana, we find another branch of the same created Tswana ethnicity whose story is remarkably different, not to mention other parts of the nonwestern world.²⁹ Keep the Comaroffs' claims of nonwestern near-universality in mind as I move away from the issue of agency to that of narrative through John Peel's 1995 article "But Who Hath Despised the Day of Small Things? Missionary Narratives and Historical Anthropology."

a class Sanneh is presently teaching entitled *American Missionaries in West African Christianity: 1792-1892*.

²⁸ Comaroffs, 6.

²⁹ Excuse me for jumping ahead, but in Comaroffs' rather patronizing and hostile response to Landau's critique, they claim that his criticisms of *Volume I* are invalid because the case of Ngwato Christianity is 'a special case' and 'is quite unique'. What makes what happened with the Southern Tswana so much more universal? Or is it that a completely different evangelization experience found so close to their own case study is too threatening to their own claims of near-universality? See John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier, Volume II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 38. All other notations from Comaroffs in this paper refer to *Volume I*.

The Power of Narrative Old and New

Peel describes how important narrative is to historical anthropology, and argues that “It is a critical instrument of human agency...”³⁰ He questions the Comaroffs’ assertion that the Tswana themselves had no narrative tradition while the missionaries did.³¹ Comaroffs’ argument is based on not finding such a narrative tradition in nineteenth century sources, sources which ironically were largely the writings of the same missionaries who allegedly imposed their narratives on the Tswana.³² Rather, the Comaroffs argue that Tswana historical consciousness is exhibited in non-narrative forms. It is the Comaroffs, then, who must exegete these non-narrative forms for the rest of us, a process in which “...the anthropologist’s role as gatekeeper to outside intelligibility is magnified.”³³ The Comaroffs become the voice and interpreter of the nineteenth century Tswana and the Tswana’s own lack of narrative takes away any agency they might have in their own history.³⁴ It is the Comaroffs who have denied the Tswana of a part in creating their own history, and it is also the Comaroffs who have filled this void with stories of missionaries and their nefarious hidden agendas.

Peel then shows how the Christian narrative brought to Africa did not replace the traditional narratives, but rather enriched them. It was especially important for those who had been sold into slavery, a process which disconnected them from their people and their history. The fortunate few who were settled as recaptives in Sierra Leone were given a second chance – and this liberation “..opens the way to the recovery of the narrative.”³⁵ The recaptives embraced Christianity in their new environment and those of Yoruba descent led the missionary push into Yorubaland *themselves*. The new Christianized narratives they formed on their return reconnected them to their past. An

³⁰ John Peel, “‘But Who Hath Despised the Day of Small Things?’ Missionary Narratives and Historical Anthropology,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, 3 (July 1995), 582.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 586.

³² *Ibid.*, 587.

³³ *Ibid.*, 588.

exceptionally vivid example is that of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first black bishop in the Anglican Church, and one of the leading churchmen of the nineteenth century. Upon his return to Yorubaland, he was fortunate enough to see his mother Afala again. His mother converted to Christianity and was baptized at Crowther's hands as Hannah. Peel writes, "As Afala bore Ajayi in the flesh, now Samuel reaffiliated himself to Hannah in spirit."³⁶ By this act, Crowther's English name randomly given him in honour of a vicar in England gained a new significance as Hannah is also the name of the Biblical Samuel's mother. In so doing, Crowther created a new narrative for himself from an old Biblical one which had now also become a Yoruba narrative.³⁷

Alternative Perspectives on the Northern Cape

Thus far, I have critiqued the Comaroffs for their misunderstanding of conversion, their adherence to cultural relativism, and their dislike of cultural change. Drawing on the work of Paul Landau, I have shown their shortcomings in not awarding African agency, and with the help of John Peel, I have questioned their assertion that the Tswana had no historical narratives. The examples of Landau and Peel are from outside the immediate area of the Comaroffs' study. What do other scholars say about missionary activity within the general region of Comaroffs' Southern Tswana?

In the article "Freedhold farmers and frontier settlers, 1657-1780", Leonard Guelke shows how settlement and colonial expansion in the Cape Colony went along quite fine without the need for missionary 'footsoldiers'. He argues that the exclusivist Calvinism of the Boer settlers did not focus on missions and that part of their inherent belief in their superiority over nonwhites came from their

³⁴ Ibid., 589.

³⁵ Ibid., 595.

³⁶ Ibid., 597.

³⁷ Ibid., 597.

monopoly of Christianity.³⁸ Was the non-universalist nature of Boer Christianity a sign of their ‘Africaness’ and is this type of racist non-intrusive Christianity what Comaroffs would prefer?³⁹

In an article on the Orange River frontier zone, Nigel Penn describes an alarming array of ethnicities and their conflicts as these societies went through profound changes prompted by the arrival of settlers and the advent of their integration into the Cape economy.⁴⁰ For these people, Christianity offered a means to restructure disintegrated societies after severe disorientation. Rather than destroying their culture and disrupting their way of life, Christianity provided a way to reorganize after “The social fabric of entire societies had been torn apart, resulting in attendant cultural and psychological trauma for individual members.”⁴¹ Others not so shattered saw Christianity as the key to literacy and to checking the rampant racism that Christian supremacist Boers exhibited towards them.⁴² Missionary involvement in the process was not as beneficent as Christianity itself as their political and economic ties to the colony was a major practical attraction for frontier leaders desiring recognition by the colony.⁴³

In another article in the same volume as Guelke’s, Martin Legassick discusses the Northern Frontier of the Cape Colony, partially focusing on missionary involvement there. When missionaries

³⁸ Leonard Guelke, “Freehold farmers and frontier settlers, 1657-1780,” in Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee, eds., *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 97.

³⁹ It seems to me that any Christian community without a missionary impulse is inherently ethnocentric. They do not spread the gospel as commanded in the Great Commission found on the Gospel of Matthew 28:19-20 because they see themselves as superior and those around them as undeserving of the gospel message explicitly meant for everyone to hear.

⁴⁰ Nigel Penn, “The Orange River Frontier Zone, c. 1700-1805,” in Andrew Smith, ed., *Einaqualand: Studies of the Orange River Frontier* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1995). Penn writes of Korana, Einaqua, Namaqua, Coraqua, and many other groups, making one wonder at the Comaroffs’ generalization of the Southern Tswana as an identifiable ethnic category.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 90. For the recaptives in Sierra Leone, Christianity had a similar attraction – to fill a void and provide a cultural unity which aided in constructing a new identity. Lamin Sanneh argues that the Christianity of the recaptives was a Christianity which integrated many aspects of their varied traditions, creating a distinctly Creole Christianity which allowed the recaptives to still have a connection to the societies from which they had been torn. See Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, 83-89.

⁴² Penn, 90.

from the London Missionary Society began arriving at the Cape in 1799, the British and Batavian governments were not sure whether to view them as a threat or an advantage. At the early stages of mission work in the Cape Colony, the missionary role was undefined and they had expectations from both those who invited them as well as the colonial officials who allowed them, often putting them in difficult situations regarding their allegiances. The mixed-race Bastard community on the Northern Frontier invited missionaries to work among them, beginning with William Anderson in 1801.⁴⁴ The missionary John Campbell was indeed instrumental in recreating the Bastards as the Griqua, but in Legassick's article, we never see missionaries with absolute hegemony completely transforming entire societies. There was also much work done by local evangelists – Khoikhoi and Griqua, the latter's work often leading to the expansion of the somewhat Christian Griqua state similar to the example of Khama's BaNgwato kingdom.

The Sotho-Tswana in the territory to the north – the Comaroffs' Southern Tswana – had traded with the Griqua since the beginning of the 1800s, and there were Sotho-Tswana converts within Griqualand quite early on. When James Read went to be a missionary among the Tlhaping branch of the Sotho-Tswana, it was by invitation from the chief. The people themselves had reservations about the wisdom behind this invitation as they did not want the missionaries to change their society as they had changed the Bastards/Griqua, a sign that the missionaries did not 'sneak' up on them unexpectedly.⁴⁵ There was also 'native' agency in the spread of Christianity to the Sotho-Tswana.

From the history of the arrival and spread of Christianity in the region, the struggle over hegemony was not about conversion or between missionaries and the Southern Tswana, but rather it

⁴³ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁴ Martin Legassick, "The Northern Frontier to 1840," in Elphick and Giliomee, 377.

⁴⁵ Legassick, 395.

was a struggle over political power between the Griqua and the Sotho-Tswana. When missionaries arrived, they were not entering an area without any prior knowledge of European culture and Christianity. Missionaries also did not come in such a way that they were all-powerful intruders, but rather as invited guests working with Griqua and Khoi evangelists. If the consciousness of the Southern Tswana was indeed colonized, it was not at the hands of the few foreign missionaries but through a long process of political, economic, and religious interaction between the Southern Tswana and their neighbours, a process in which the missionaries played small but important roles.

To add to all these, Elizabeth Elbourne took a look at missionary history in the land of the Southern Tswana and suggests that the Christianizing was not as black and white as the Comaroffs describe. As she points out, it was not such a clear cut process and non-whites were involved at all points of the encounter, including the original missionary delegations sent to negotiate the possibility of missions in the area.⁴⁶

The Final Analysis

Did the Comaroffs prove what they set out to – that the consciousness of the Southern Tswana was colonized by the missionaries? To some extent, they did, but only because they used their own definitions and their own readings of rather selective sources. More than anything else, this book proves that brilliant writing can be quite deceiving, that between the lines one can find a hidden agenda. If the Comaroffs have truly played fast and loose with all these sources to colour missionaries and Christianity in the image they desire, then the Africanists and anthropologist who hail them are either completely led astray by their equivocal style, or perhaps, are not concerned because the issue is missions, a topic which Africanists widely treat without objectivity any way.

⁴⁶ Elbourne, 15.

The world of the Tswana was indeed dramatically transformed, but the transformation was part of a bigger series of events and not only due to the work of missionaries.

What *Of Revelation and Revolution* and the other works discussed here prove is that the study of missions in Africa needs to be revisited with a greater emphasis on African agency in the Christianization process. The very term 'missionary' itself has racial connotations – missionaries are almost always white, while African missionaries are mere 'evangelists'. This stems from our present understanding of what a missionary is – someone sent by a foreign mission agency. The Biblical missionary, however, is anyone who preaches the gospel of Christ outside his or her immediate community. If we recognize this definition of missionary, then it also includes millions of Africans who have historically been the real force behind the spread of Christianity in Africa. With this alternative definition of missionary the history of missionaries in Africa becomes largely the story of a movement launched by a few foreign missionaries, but made a success by countless Africans who converted, for reasons which the Comaroffs or any one else will probably never be able to explain.

Another aspect of the Western missionary encounter with Africa that is missing is the analysis of missions as a two way process. While the missionaries were colonizing the consciousness of Africans as they have been accused, were the Africans not also colonizing the consciousness of the missionaries? For example, could missionary involvement in local African politics be seen as a part of the process of their own 'Africanization' rather than of their attempts to extend colonial domination? Missionaries and their children are profoundly transformed from their cross cultural experiences, and this is transferred back to the sending community – I myself am an example of this process. Missionaries, then, did not only aid in the transformation of African cultures because of their Western world view, they also aided in the transformation of Western cultures through their own Africanized cultural transformation.

Benediction: An African's Response

I will conclude with an insight from a Nigerian scholar and churchman which will perhaps provide another motive for the attempts of scholars such as the Comaroffs to critique missionaries so harshly. It will also explain the title of this paper. At the end of an interview, I described some of the widespread academic critiques against missions and Christianity in Africa to Rev. Dr. Cannon E. Ajulo, a professor of English at the University of Jos, and the vicar of a 'Nigerianized' Anglican church founded by and for Europeans in 1926. His pointed response to these critiques was a warning to their proponents: "Don't use Africans as your excuse."⁴⁷ A Nigerian Christian like Ajulo is concerned about the dark past of Christianity's arrival on the continent, but this is not a viable excuse to denounce the religion he and some 330 million other Africans adhere to.⁴⁸ In his opinion, it is also not a viable justification for the unbelief of those studying Africa who have not yet come to terms with the fact that Christianity is now African, and that a great number of Africans are now Christian.

⁴⁷ Interview with Rev. Dr. Canon E. Ajulo, 28 July, 1998 in Jos, Nigeria.

⁴⁸ Statistic from "Status of Global Mission, 1998, in Context of 20th and 21st Centuries," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 1998): 27.

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