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Book Feature
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Boekbeskouing[1]

Patrick Harries, *Butterflies & Barbarians. Swiss Missionaries & Systems of Knowledge in South-East Africa*
James Currey, Oxford; Weaver Press, Harare; Wits University Press, Johannesburg and Ohio University Press, Athens, 2007
286 pp
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Swiss Readings of Africa

With *Butterflies and Barbarians* Patrick Harries has indeed placed under scrutiny what is announced in the subtitle to this book: *Swiss Missionaries & Systems of Knowledge in South-East Africa*. Although dealing to a large extent with the study and the "making" of particular African languages by the Swiss missionaries and their African assistants, this was a research project which in itself demanded thorough and painstaking mulling over numerous German and, especially, French sources from the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The catchy first part of the book's title uncomfortably confronted this reader with some of her own deductions, as well as some expectations about what contemporaneous Swiss readers would have made of the accompanying images on the cover of the book: Underneath a border of insect illustrations, one is greeted by a close-up of the "Thonga" diviner, Hokoza, in full military regalia, flanked on the left by missionary wife Missus Benoit and her child in 1920s European dress and on the right by an unknown, presumably "Thonga" woman in a European dress, suckling a, presumably, "Thonga" child. The unease this illustration unleashes regarding the ascribing of racial, national, ethnic and gendered identities cleverly plunges one into the intriguing problematic of the book as a whole: making things and people fit into a view of the world that has implications for the procurement of resources and the exercising of power. To Harries, this is as much a book about Swiss identity, as it is about attempting to understand a particular part of Africa and its inhabitants. It is very much about the extent to which

1. A third review, by Nigel Penn of the University of Cape Town, will appear in the next issue of *Historia*.

neither the Swiss cantons where these missionaries came from, nor the parts of South-East Africa where they worked from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, can today be configured separately. And yet, when we jump ahead to Chapter 8, where Harries discusses the series of photographs to which the image on the cover of the book also belongs, we learn that in the anthropological work which missionary Henri-Alexandre Junod prepared for European readers, all traces of Swiss presence had to be removed – precisely because it was in such scenes of African life that Europeans traced back their own "primitive origins" of "lost innocence":

> Junod chose photographs as carefully as the facts he decided to display in his monograph [*The Life of a South African Tribe*]. In this way he constituted the picture of a primitive society that conformed to the expectations of the ethnographic genre at the turn of the century. This picture of an unchanging African society contributed to the development of segregationist policies. In the late 1920s it was subjected to a growing criticism from a new generation of university-trained anthropologists (p 226).

The indigenous communities had to some extent indeed become what the Swiss had made them into, but in a way so very differently to what had been anticipated. There were the Christain modernists like Calvin Mapopé, who on his visit to Switzerland "spoke in glowing terms of the Swiss as a people chosen by God to take the message to the Thonga as a *Gemeinschaft*" (referring to "the church's ability to sift from European civilization only its most positive elements" - p 247). However, Harries also points out the political irony of African nationalists appropriating the racial categorisations once imposed upon them to the point of inverting their meaning:

> In a post-war climate of regained liberties and exaggerated economic expectations, some black politicians in South Africa read the salvage anthropology of Junod's generation as the story of a golden age destroyed by capitalism and colonialism, and found in this work both a description of cultural authenticity and yet another reason to mobilize as a race in opposition to white supremacy (p 262).

A lot however first needs to be unravelled before the cover of the book can be connected with the anthropology and politics that constitute the last two chapters of Harries' work. In the preceding seven chapters, he lays the foundations bare and explains the processes in which these systems of knowledge had been constructed through the long conversation – to hark back to a Comaroff term – between the Swiss and the people who, through this conversation, came to refer to themselves as Thonga.

The book opens in Switzerland. In the first chapter, Harries uses Swiss history in a sophisticated argument to illustrate how "evangelical Christianity and universal compassion had become crucial elements in the mosaic of images that allowed the Swiss to think of themselves as a distinctive community", and how "Christians at home would find the mission field a testing ground for their faith and a source of strength for their church" (p 21). In this approach, I detected something of Paul Tiyambe Zeleza's recent appeal for the insertion of Africa into a new global history through the "deconstruction" of Eurocentric history in Europe itself.[2] From the outset, Harries makes it clear that while the fact that Switzerland was no imperialistic power may have resulted in a differently-nuanced engagement with Africa than, for example, Britain, the "colony-less Swiss" nevertheless

> ... participated in the intellectual redrawing of the world as their scientists [including missionaries] ordered the rare entomological and botanical specimens sent home, and arranged their findings in maps and charts. Scientific articles, museum collections, botanical gardens and herbaria, as well as local, cantonal and national exhibitions provided a constant reminder of the link between individual enterprise and the material achievements of the Swiss people. The exultation felt by the missionaries in Africa as they gazed on the strength and power of their nation and their civilization, was reflected at home through these scientific institutions (p 55).

Harries uses the subsequent chapters on Christianity, landscape, natural sciences, language and literacy to illustrate the process of the making and dissemination of knowledge in these respective spheres, without allowing the reader to lose sight of the interconnectedness between the different categories. The chapter on anthropology, which might as well have been named "Junod's Anthropology", illustrates this missionary's evolution from the study of plants and insects to the study of people. A thorough exposition of the organising principles that underlay

2. P.T. Zeleza, "Banishing the Silences. Towards the Globalisation of African History," Codesria, http://www.codesria.org/Links/conferences/general_assembly11/papers/zeleza.pdf. "Colonialism will continue to be a central theme of African historical research, but African historians need to expand the canvas of colonialism, following the trails of postcolonial theory, to encompass the imperial metropoles beyond the question of colonial policies, and show the complex and contradictory processes of mutual constitution of colonized and colonizing societies, the continuous and contested flows and counterflows of commodities and cultures, discourses and diseases, ideologies and institutions, peoples and practices, values and vices. Colonialism remade Africa as much it remade Europe. Histories of Europe need to be rewritten in which colonialism is accorded a central place."

nineteenth-century European epistemologies, which would also be intrinsic to Junod's "salvage anthropology", runs as a continuum through all the chapters.

All in all, Harries confirms rather than challenges the general consensus in current post-colonial academic thinking on cultural contact, or cultural encounters, between Europeans and Africans. Much of what he confirms about the Swiss-Thonga case, has already been illustrated in previous studies on other encounters. What makes this study unique, is the way in which theories on the appropriation of Christianity, or literacy, on the standardisation of languages, the aestheticisation of landscapes and the rendering of their contents into scientific cartographies or taxonomies are all brought together around and applied to one remarkable case. Harries is indeed good at uncovering from the missionaries' own texts their realisations about the way their own subjectivities characterised, but also restricted, the processes with which they busied themselves:

> Henri-Alexandre Junod: This is Africa, such is the land and so are the people (p 104).
>
> Henri Berthoud: Despite my utmost I cannot yet preach in Sigwamba, I can make myself understood depending on the intelligence and goodwill of those listening to me (p 160).

I am disappointed by the fact that Harries is so reluctant to engage with other recent scholarly work on similar topics to the ones he selected as his chapter headings. Particularly in his chapter on landscape, reference to Alan Kirkaldy's work on the way the Berlin Missionaries perceived neighbouring "Vendaland" at exactly the same time, is an odd omission.[3] Similarly in the chapter on literacy, a single reference to Isabel Hofmeyr's *The portable Bunyan* does not suffice. Since the early 1990s, Hofmeyr has already raised and pushed many of the issues presented here by Harries – if not further, at least in different directions which have to be contemplated and compared.[4]

Book historians would nevertheless find Harries' thorough and prolonged emphasis on the density of a Swiss reading culture, the conscious way in which the missionaries aimed at controlling knowledge

3. A. Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul. The Vhavenda and the missionaries, 1870-1900* (Protea, Pretoria, 2005), pp 121-145.
4. I. Hofmeyr, "Jonah and swallowing Monster: Orality and Literacy on a Berlin Mission Station in the Transvaal", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 17, 4, December 1991, pp 633-653; "The Globe in the Text: Towards a Trans-national History of the Book", *African Studies* 64, 1, July 2005, pp 87-103.

through a monopoly over printing technology, as well as the ways in which Africans interpreted the symbolic power of the book for their own purposes, most useful and enlightening.

Something which I also appreciated, was that the status and power of women are not relegated to and "dealt with" in a single chapter, but are constantly included in discussions throughout the book. Harries indeed takes care not to portray power as neutral force, but rather to illuminate fluctuations in the possibility for female agency – as well as the reascribing of spheres as masculine or feminine – as a result of new conceptualisations and new arrangements of knowledge.

My lasting impression of this journey through the missionaries' Ronga/Gwamba/Thonga world, is that they themselves did not always have consensus about how to classify what they observed – or what it was that they observed, and that in a long career such as Junod's, there are different stages, different trajectories of writing to be scrutinised and different moments of insight, or lack thereof, to be considered in the very complex and layered context in which it was expressed at the time and recycled at later times. The same has to be said about the Swiss readers who allowed themselves to be oscilated by missionary publications through the whole spectrum of responses between revulsion and admiration, alienation and recognition.

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