Editorial


Arguably, Lamak, Hovland, and Morier-Genoud collectively make a case for privileging indigenous histories and perspectives through their attempts to tell the other side of the story. The story they tell primarily revolves around unearthing buried, untold histories of West Africa’s precolonial religious landscape, charting the historiography of Christian missions and politics in twentieth-century colonial Angola and Mozambique, and excavating the indigenization of Christianity in Southern Africa respectively. Lamak opens the scene with his article that revisits the agelong discourse on the demonization of African indigenous religions, and seeks to make the case that the West African Traditional Religion (WATR) of the 1400s is similar to any other world religion. He seeks to accomplish this by framing the religious beliefs and cultural practices of Africans in the 1400s in relation to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Lamak argues that the adherents of WATR maintained knowledge of the supreme God in all generations prior to the 1400s. He adds that since Africa was the birthplace of all humans, their knowledge of the divine may predate that of all other religions. He explores the religious beliefs that West Africans maintain, primarily the belief in a supreme spirit, malevolent and benevolent spirits, and ancestral spirits, as well as contrasting the Christian beliefs in miracles with WATR’s practices of magic and medicine.

Lamak then examines the social practices and values that West Africans maintained in the 1500s and prior to the period of slavery. He argues that, like
Christians, adherents of WATRs had a sense of morality that distinguished between good and bad, both in relation to fellow humans and in relation to the divine. The author explores themes of festivals and rituals, religious practitioners, and the concept of the afterlife. These are posited as exemplars that accentuate the primary goal of reclaiming the validity of WATR from Western stereotypes, and validating the similarity between WATR and other world religions. This is in addition to suggesting the endurance of WATR in African American spirituality and cultural practices, as well as extolling the contributions of African scholars in reclaiming the validity of WATRs. Yet despite this impressive ‘repositioning’, it is important to ask whether the credibility assigned to African indigenous religions and spirituality is to the extent that it is similar/dissimilar to ‘world religions’ such as Christianity. Regardless, Lamak’s article provides a good overview of the contested terrain of academic discourse on the scope of the African religious landscape and foregrounds Hovland’s essay, which begins at the intersection of indigenous conversion to Christianity and the construction of social relations.

Hovland picks up where Lamak left off by focusing on the rupture in the history of Christianity in Africa, but primarily the emergence of African Christianity. The author seeks to engage in what she described as ‘a historical project with anthropological objectives’ by tracing the founding, growth, and development of the first Ethiopianist church in the Colony of Natal in Southern Africa. Hovland applies an anthropological lens to understanding the expansion of Protestantism/Protestant congregations among indigenous Africans. More precisely, she employs the anthropology of Christianity in explaining the proliferation of Ethiopianist congregations in this region, using the case study of Mbinyana Ngidi, who founded the first AIC or at least the first ‘that was explicitly disowned by white missionaries’. According to the author, previous works have mainly credited the appearance, growth, and spread of these African-initiated (Ethiopianist) congregations to three main factors: first, the result of protesting the realities of their colonial context; second, Protestant denominationalism and schisms within even missionary-led congregations; and third, as expressions of indigenous spirituality. However, Hovland’s core contribution is found in her suggestion of a fourth rationale. Employing a methodology encapsulating both historical and anthropological frameworks, she suggests that those churches also emerged out of a phenomenon of Protestant replication propelled by the desire to ‘get Christianity right’ within the Protestant tradition, coupled with the Protestant quest for Christian originality. Hovland argues that these sentiments are expressed through the processes of replication and repetition, and are primarily enacted in social
relationships. As such, the author utilizes this rationale to defend her asserted logic that ‘the “real embodiment of the divine” in Protestantism is in mimesis’ and ‘is “irreducibly social”’.

Mbiyana Ngidi was the first African to be baptized and joined the membership of an American-led congregational mission church in Natal. He would eventually secede from the church and proclaim himself bishop of an Ethiopianist-like African congregation. According to Hovland, replication can be understood as ‘the relational aspect of mimesis to highlight that the replication is part and parcel of a social relationship’, while repetition denotes ‘the temporal aspect of mimesis to highlight that something is repeated after a period of time’. Thus Ngidi’s conversion, ordination, and eventual schism can be read as processes of identification, imitation, and reproduction respectively, in keeping with the suggested Protestant quest for replication. With this, Hovland introduces the dynamics and politics of the power, hegemony, and individual agency that are constantly (re)negotiated within these social structures and relationships, but also evident in Ngidi’s attempt to assert his authority and validate his congregation amid the other missionary-led Protestant missionary congregations in the Colony of Natal.

These questions on the politics of power, hegemony, and agency are equally central to Morier-Genoud’s article, which pursues the construction of a historiography of the academic evolution and discourse of missions and politics in twentieth-century colonial Angola and Mozambique. The author explores scholarly discourse on missions and politics in two broad themes: missions and African nationalism, and African reception, action, and reappropriation. Prior to the academic turn in discourse about missionaries and politics in these contexts in the 1960s, available writings on missions were primarily hagiographic and authored by clergy and church members. Morier-Genoud argues that in the 1960s and ’70s three interrelated dynamics spurred a shift in such discourses: first, the development of African nationalism marked in Angola and Mozambique by liberation wars in 1961 and 1964 respectively; second, the theological reforms that occurred within Christian churches in Angola and Mozambique and the Catholic Church in Vatican II; and lastly, the reforms that the Portuguese colonial state introduced in the 1960s as a result of the previous two developments.

By the 1980s writings began to show two plain patterns: they were interested in the nature of church-state relations during the colonial era, and they were curious about the relation between missionaries and African nationalism. These writers were mostly concerned with whether missionaries or religious institutions supported or stood against colonialism and/or African
nationalism, and how these worked differently within Protestant and Catholic missions. This ultimately led to what Morier-Genoud terms a ‘political paradigm’ in the 2000s. By the late 2000s and 2010s, scholarly interest had shifted primarily to the question of missions and politics, and the political paradigm was undone by the new zeal to ‘rescue particular individuals from obscurity in the official record’. This was characterized by biographical publications on mainly African pastors, priests, and missionaries who contributed to decolonization and nationalist movements.

With regard to African reception, action, and reappropriation, Morier-Genoud suggests that the 1970s ushered in a shift in research interest from the study of missionaries to an examination of the African reception and reappropriation of Christianity, as well as their missionary endeavors. Within the scholarship on Mozambique and Angola, this shift began to emerge in the 1980s and has mainly focused on the Tokoist church in Angola and Zionist congregations in Mozambique. There has also been an interest in exploring the Africanization of European-originated missionary organizations including ‘daughter churches’ of missionary organizations, and theological education and training institutions for clergy and laity in both Mozambique and Angola. More recent scholarly trends since the 1990s and 2000s have focused less on political topics but mainly on various cultural subjects. These include an anthropological outlook on missions, missionaries, and photography; the impact that missionary work in Angola and Mozambique had on the sending countries such as the United States, Portugal, and parts of Europe; as well as the missionary work relating to the rise and spread of Pentecostalism in Angola and Mozambique.

However, according to Morier-Genoud, the historiography of Angola and Mozambique is still missing research pertaining to the ‘reappropriation of the Christian missionary message by African converts and the intellectual history of the African laity believers’, including works that offer a Christian anthropological lens on local culture, beliefs, and ideas of indigenous conversion and missionary exploits. The author concludes that mitigating these lacunae will reveal new vistas on analysing missions, missionaries, and politics in the twentieth century, as well as understanding the religious policies of colonial states and the political imagination and reappropriation of faith by indigenous believers in Angola and Mozambique individually or comparatively.

Landry then shifts both the geographic and religious foci to Benin, West Africa, where he examines Fa Divination among the Fon peoples. In his article Landry challenges commonly held understandings of the role and function of divination in West African indigenous religions. Popularly understood as a
‘spiritual technology’ that ‘produces knowledge, stores memories, and confers cultural wisdom’, Landry argues instead that Fa divination ‘maintains its value as a practice not in search of knowledge, but rather one in search of well-being and goodness in the world’. He therefore insists that ‘divination is not an epistemological experience, rather, it is an ontological one’. To demonstrate this claim, Landry draws on his ‘twenty-two months of ethnographic research’ as a ‘diviner’s apprentice’ in Benin, West Africa.

As an apprentice, Landry is privy to many insights. For instance, he can draw distinctions between ‘Nago (Yoruba) and Fon (Fa) divination’ and chart out the historiography of the latter in Benin. Perhaps more striking is his statement that consultants of Fa divination cut across ‘ethnic, economic and religious backgrounds’. He explains that practitioners of Christianity and Islam justify their participation in Fa by insisting that it helps them actualize ‘their destinies’, overcome their challenges, and ‘improve the ways [they] live and exist in the world’. In this way, Fa divination ‘cools’ them by enhancing their psycho-social equilibriums. However, even though Fa divination is concerned with realizing individual destinies, Landry maintains that it connects a person’s ‘individual destiny’ with the well-being of the family or larger social community the person comes from.

Therefore, through careful and detailed ‘mapping out Fa’s sacred objects, the ways in which [people] consult Fa during divinatory sessions and Fa’s various rituals’, Landry reveals the intra- and interreligious dynamics in Benin, and shows how religious identities are dynamic and sporous. He also indicates how the ethical commitments that Fa divination prescribes help strengthen social harmony. Most importantly, such work enables him to argue against the dominant ‘divination as knowledge trope’. While he acknowledges that ‘divination accomplishes many tasks simultaneously’, he insists that its primary function is to help people realize ‘their destinies on earth and live the most fulfilled or ‘cool’ life possible’.

Whereas Landry focuses on Fa divination among the Fon people, Akande’s article examines cultural continuities among the Oyo-Yoruba, Sabe-Yoruba, and Ife-Ana-Yoruba communities through engagement with popular maxims and ‘traditional’ religious paraphernalia. Akande uses an ‘eclectic approach’ that employs ‘indigenous’ criteria known as ‘masquerade theory’ to study these sources. He argues that maxims are carriers of historical and cultural memories that consequently reveal how communities think about themselves, their cosmogenic narratives, and the values they hold dear. Yet Akande is also committed to examining cultural discontinuities. Aware that the Sabe-Yoruba and Ife-Ana have ‘for centuries, lived in their present communities’, Akande seeks
to examine how ‘nostalgia’ for the Oyo-Yoruba is produced and reproduced in these communities. Therefore while one strength of Akande’s article is its ability to demonstrate how maxims and religious paraphernalia are used to construct historical memories and inform social identities, another is how deftly it engages themes of belonging, community, and home.

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