Patrick Harries and David Maxwell (eds.)


In his scintillating contribution to *Missions and Empire* (2005) Patrick Harries charted the way in which missionaries were first welcomed, then sidelined and finally cast out by the nascent discipline of anthropology during the first half of the twentieth century. A workshop convened late in 2007 charged a diverse group of specialists with the task of broadening Harries’ line of research into a more general consideration of relations between missions and science in Africa. Although the scope of the symposium extended to the fields of botany and medicine, most contributors dealt with social science, particularly anthropology and linguistics. The ultimate product is this stimulating volume which suggests that missions and social science could neither live with nor without each other in Africa. In the early days of so-called armchair anthropology missionaries supplied copious data from the field that could not have been otherwise collected, given the slender resources of gentlemanly scholarship. Even after the Malinowskian revolution made fieldwork a professional sine qua non, few social scientists could rival the knowledge many missionaries acquired during decades of residence among Africans. More chagrining for anthropologists was dependence on well-established mission networks that ensured security, transport, food supplies and access to informants at stations and preaching places. It often seemed as though secular researchers wilfully suppressed their debts to the missions by concealing the identities of their informants, destroying their field notes and erasing the Christian presence from their published reports. From the social scientists’ point of view the missionaries appeared indifferent to what they viewed as the all important business of developing and refining theory. Missionary ethnography in their eyes constituted little more than a Baconian enterprise of endless fact gathering. And even though religious change gradually emerged as a priority for research, secular researchers and missionaries seemed perpetually ranged on opposite sides of the barricades, with the former regretting and the latter embracing the fruits of conversion.

The editors’ insightful introduction lists a number of reasons for the perpetually uneasy relations between missions and social science in Africa. Some are expressed in startling terms. Missionary ethnographers, they write, “built personal relations of trust with assistants (often Christian converts) whom they acknowledged in their published work for their skills in both gathering and explaining information.” In contrast the professionals “arrived in the field with a training that explicitly rejected native ways of understanding.” While “mis-
sionaries used their linguistic skills to accumulate ostensibly antiquarian lists of native terms, professional anthropologists searched for laws (of initiation, kinship, or chiefly power) that only they could explain” (p. 21). On the other hand, missionaries could hardly be expected to keep pace with the development of social theory. Their meagre stipends precluded subscriptions to most secular journals and most displayed a stubborn reluctance to bow to the latest interpretative fashion. More commonly they “remained loyal to ideas they had encountered just prior to setting out for the mission field, long after such ideas had passed out of fashion” (p. 19). Dmitri van den Bersselaar’s chapter on G.T. Basden, Christian Missionary Society missionary to the Igbo in Nigeria, illustrates the problem. Basden’s ethnographical works were destined for a long shelf life as a source of raw data; indeed, many have been recently reprinted. However, his indifference to the disciplinary requirements of anthropology, especially the need to contribute to the development of theory distanced him from professionals. His ethnographies aimed rather to gain recognition for the Igbo whom he had come to regard as “his people.” John Cinnamanon’s chapter explores the work done by R.H. Nassau and Henri Trilles on fetishism and totemism in early twentieth-century Gabon. Although it resonated for a time with celebrated analyses advanced by Durkheim and Freud, this research over the longer term ploughed a lonely furrow through fields of speculation abandoned by mainstream social science.

Other chapters by Deborah Gaitskell and John Stuart show that in propitious circumstances missionaries could be remade as social scientists. After Dora Earthy’s work in Mozambique brought her to the attention of pioneering South African anthropologists, she enthusiastically embraced the young science. The German Lutheran Dorothea Lehmann was likewise drawn into a groundbreaking study of new churches of the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt. Judging from examples cited in various chapters the pathway from the mission to professional anthropological research was a one-way street. Whether children of missionaries like Monica Hunter, or recruits like Dora Earthy, once enrolled among the accredited practitioners their attention shifted permanently away from the evangelical enterprise.

The overwhelming impression created by the remaining chapters in this eclectic collection is of particularity and diversity. W.T. Kalusa’s contribution on missionary medicine in Zambia focuses more on the African perceptions and understandings than on the efficacy of the medical ministrations, while John Manton’s research into the treatment of leprosy in postwar Nigeria features the close relationship with the colonial state. Cooperation with the state is likewise the main issue in Natasha Erlank’s study of a joint venture between the International Missionary Council and the International African Institute investigating