

BOOK REVIEW

**Butterflies and Barbarians:  
Swiss Missionaries and Systems  
of Knowledge in South-East  
Africa**

(Patrick Harries (2007). Oxford: James Currey; Harare: Weaver Press; Johannesburg: Wits University Press; Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007. xvii + 286 pp. Photographs. Maps. Figures. Notes. Bibliography. Index. ISBN: 978-0-8214-1777-5 [pbk.] )

**Felix Banda**

The book is rich and dense in detail covering differing fields ranging from history, anthropology, role of Christianity in the creation of ethnicity and tribes in Africa, to the linguistic aspects colonialism as well as the onset of unequal power relations among Africans based on formal (written) and oral versions of African languages. The book has old maps of South Eastern Africa as well as illustrative figures and photographs of butterflies, fauna and some of the most influential Swiss missionaries to venture south of the Sahara in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Of particular interest is how the Missionaries tried and to some extent succeeded in changing the knowledge systems of the indigenous Africans in South-East Africa through their writings, actions and practices. The book is also about how Africans undermined and adapted the European knowledge systems to suit their conditions. This did not always go well with the missionaries who saw their mission as to bring 'light' to the 'darkest' of Africa.

The book mostly chronicles the role of Henri-Alexandre Junod a Swiss missionary cum-entomologist-cum-botanist-cum naturalist. Junod with the help of other white missionaries and African collectors identified plants, collected and classified butterflies, constructed languages, tribes and ethnicities through their work on African dictionaries, orthographies and anthropology. He also sought to explain his theory of (African) natural science using Christian philosophy. Using the linguistic and skills in natural sciences of his African assistants and collectors (whose contributions he fails to adequately recognise), Junod came up with *The Life of a South African Tribe* between 1898 and 1927, which is recognised as well as vilified as a classic in South African anthropology. It is vilified for sowing the first seeds of racial segregation and tribalism in the Southern parts of Africa. Incredibly, Junod drew conclusions on African and human culture in general from his study of how butterflies are able to adapt and thrive to particular habits. It is seen as a classic for its detail and the fact that it was one of the first books of its nature to be written at the time.

Patrick Harries, the author, was initially interested in Swiss missionaries and started browsing the archives of the Swiss Mission in Lausanne on how they brought changes to Southern Mozambique. As his interest on the subject grew and so did the scope of his enquiry to include how missionaries generally perceived Africa and the impact their African experiences had on their lives and others in Switzerland. Particular focus was also on how the activities of the missionaries created tribes out of people who did not see themselves as belonging to 'tribes', manufactured vernacular languages which they then linked to the constructed tribes and particular borders, and especially, they imposed a European worldview and knowledge system on Africans. Harries suggests this was the beginning of hegemony and dominance of certain groups of people based on the 'standard' written language, which was not always the language spoken by ordinary people. This was also the beginning of dominance of Western knowledge systems over indigenous ones.

The book is written in 9 chapters of more or less equal length. Chapter 1 looks at Christian renaissance that swept through western Switzerland in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This saw the emergence of numerous Free churches and mission societies all vying to save the dark souls in Africa. The Christian revivals also brought a strong desire by missionaries to be free of government control. This in turn led to the birth of intellectual institutions in church circles whose boundaries went above the duties of evangelism, to African history, anthropology, etc.

In chapter 2 Harries discusses how the images emanating from Africa found their way into Swiss homes and to influence their way of life. The Swiss mission work in Africa made them realise that they were a people wracked with factionalisms based on religion, language, region and class. Through sustained campaigns, the missionaries introduced African story telling techniques, skills in the Arts, etc to the Swiss. However, the image of Africa as an evil dark continent in need of salvation persisted in the homes and public spaces of Switzerland. The chapter also touches on the cultural influences that laid the foundation to imperialism.

Chapter 3 traces the early mission work in what is now called Lesotho and Transvaal in the 1850s and 1870s. Here Harries focuses on the Paris Evangelical Mission Society, which was later joined by the Free Church of the Canton of Vaud. The society made its base at the foot of Zoutpansberg from where converted Africans fanned out to spread the word of God to

the far areas coastal plains of Mozambique. These areas were inhabited by multilingual and multicultural communities quite unlike the kinds of monoglot communities the missionaries were used to in Europe. The missionaries were not aware that the area was populated by polyglot communities and set about transcribing and translating the bible into what they thought was the language spoken by all people in the areas. Harries highlights the important role played by Africans in the spread of Christianity as well as in the transcribing and designs of orthographic conventions of African languages. The proliferation of missions and evangelists led to friction and competition for converts and territories of influence. The metropole lost control of the Christianity movement and also the content of the message, and where African evangelists were concerned this led to a dynamic and indigenised Christianity.

Chapter 4 looks at the manner in which the Swiss landscape influenced the way missionaries perceived Africa. Looking at Africa through Swiss lenses led to misrepresentation of African landscapes and misconceptions about Africans' way of life. Harries argues that African culture, tradition, socio-economic and political make up were distorted out of context as they became constructions of European imagination. The misrepresented information was then used to justify colonisation at a large scale. Through novels, maps, Sunday school texts, medical manuals, history books, etc an image of evil 'dark' Africa emerged requiring colonisation and evangelisation to bring to order. Maps were drawn and borders erected to bring large spans of land and people under control. The 'order' so created availed the missionaries to control of the demarcated societies.

Harries turns to Junod's interests in natural sciences in chapter 5. Junod saw biology and theology as related. He saw the vegetation as God's handiwork and saw it as his duty to glorify God through an examination of His creation. According to Harries, Junod understands and integration of the world of animals and plants in Africa was tempered by 'a hierarchy of knowledge ... that created and encouraged imperialism.' (p. 123). Harries argues that even though Africans contributed tremendously through observations and data collection, and in terms of ideas on classification, Junod still thought Africans 'were unaware of the true system underlying the organisation and understanding of nature.' (p. 123). This, according to Harries led to the division of scientific knowledge into racial categories, which in turn justified the seizure of other people's land and what was on it. In essence, it was deemed legitimate and a noble duty to grab land and possessions from Africans since they did not understand the true nature of them. African ways of naming, classifying, organising and understanding nature were thus replaced by Western knowledge systems, and hence the racialisation of the notion of 'science.' This in turn paved the way for the logic of imperialism.

Chapter 6 focuses on language, or specifically the invention of African languages, tribes and ethnicities by Europeans. The chapter also captures some of the problems the missionaries came up in the process of creating tribes and ethnicities out of people who had a different view of community. Of particular interest was the fact that people who lived in a particular community or home did not necessarily speak one and the same language. It was also not uncommon for a homestead to have two or more languages spoken, with the wife speaking one language and the husband another. That these people lived in the same area and communicated among each other effectively means that they were highly multilingual. Migrations had also made the linguistic situation complex in that some of the languages

spoken were not understood by all in the areas. But to the missionaries the languages sounded the same. The Mission of the Free Church of the Canton of Vaud believed seSotho as transcribed by Paris Evangelical Mission Societies (PEMS) was spoken from 'Lesotho to the sources of the Nile' in the North (p. 155). When the mission set camp in Northern Transvaal, they set about teaching and preaching in South Sotho a language they had been trained in, but the local people did not understand. It was only after a year that one of the missionaries Paul Berthoud realised that he had been preaching for more than a year in a language local people did not understand! To make things worse for Berthoud, he also discovered that the linguistic situation was not as clear cut as his Western mind told him, as the people spoke different languages even though they lived in the same area. Also, they did not see themselves in the European sense of 'community' which shares language and belonging together. It also transpired that the term 'Makoapa' was not in reference to a particular language as the Europeans believed, but was a descriptive term for anybody who had migrated to the area. The people themselves did not share cultural attributes or language. In fact they spoke different languages. Berthoud translated the Lords Prayer and some hymns into 'Sekoapa' anyway! He did this with the help of his domestic 'Makoapa' and his trusted Sotho assistant Eliakim Matlanyane.

Harries notes that the local people who had learnt to read and write the invented languages such as South Sotho and Sekoapa found themselves in very enviable positions in terms of social standing. Thus, Harries notes that the Gwamba, Lemba and 'Pedi' who became literate in South Sotho became the elite and claimed the written form of language their own.

This is a classic example of how missionaries created vernaculars where they did not exist, manufactured ethnicity and tribes linked to specific linguistic forms and created borders and linguistic boundaries where they had been none. However, Berthoud did not like the fact that the written form of the language was only understood by a handful of people. He thus set about transcribing and translating the bible into Gwamba, the name he had given to the local dialect. After he began to understand Gwamba, he discovered that his South Sotho assistant Matlanyane, on whom he depended for translation of Gwamba, was in fact 'massacring the language [Gwamba] in an unmanageable way.' (p. 158).

The missionaries work to identify and locate different African sounds and dialects was hampered by the fact that they did not coordinate their work. As a result there was a 'proliferation of phonetic systems and orthographies' (p. 157) which made it impossible to record new languages or indeed to know whether a particular language had not already been transcribed by another group. The orthographies were also done by people who did not understand the linguistic landscape or the nature of Bantu languages.

In short, the chapter is packed with valuable information for the linguist, historian, anthropologist, etc. It is about how the different missionaries set about defining people in terms of what they thought their language was. In particular, Harries shows how missionaries confused words Africans used to differentiate themselves from other groups to mean 'tribe' or ethnic group, which they later in European fashion linked to language. They created linguistic boundaries where there were none. They 'standardised', 'systematised' and 'purified' certain dialects so that the mission dialect became the Language, thus elevating the mission dialect to

the 'national' or 'tribal' language of prestige. (p. 165). This also marked the beginning of the link between language and structures of power.

Chapter 7 is about the social engineering that resulted from missionary control of the 'standard' written language. Harries argues that missionaries believed that through written materials and books, the mind, soul and African society generally, would be under the control of missions. The problem, however, was that the power of the spoken word tended to be stronger than the written one at that time, so that mission control was not guaranteed in all situations. Moreover, there were very few writers and people able to read the written word at the time. However, literacy in the created languages elevated the few literate Africans, who took advantage of the situation and adopted missionaries' notion of literacy. These elites in turn adopted the mission created identities and ethnicities as their own.

Chapter 8 looks at the impact of Junod's anthropological work on the political and socio-cultural economy of people of Southern Africa. Harries suggests that Junod's writings, particularly *The Life of a South African Tribe* provided the intellectual foundation of racial segregation. Of interest is how Junod would, through a process of selection, leave out certain details in his descriptions and illustrations to portray Africans as barbarians and primitive.

The last chapter focuses on missionary work in the 1930s and before. Chapter 9 depicts Africans as having taken over the mission societies and schools. The African 'tribal' landscape was no longer as first described by Junod. The rapid industrialisation and transformation of Africa had not been envisaged in Junod's writings, but its nature appeared built on the ideas of 'tribal' and 'racial' segregation and inequality as depicted in Junod's writings. The chapter also discusses how South African anthropologists, under the guise of valuing African cultural practices supported segregation as a way to 'stop the educated Native from aspiring to be an imitation European and lead him to take his rightful place as the natural leader of his own people.' (pp. 248-249). Indirect rule was seen as the way to protect Africans and their cultures. Harries reports that in the 1910s, the International Institute of African Languages endorsed this idea. The idea was to view Africans as 'tribal natives' who should not live outside their 'tribal structure' but 'on their own lines.' (p. 255).

No doubt the apartheid government in South Africa fed on such ideas to justify arguments for separate living and education for Africans suited to their own needs. Africans were then categorised into homogenous 'tribal' groupings living in Native lands under the Native Authority of the Chiefs who ruled by the grace of the colonial government.

The chapter ends with a look at NJ van Warmelo's influential *Preliminary Survey of the Bantu Tribes of South Africa* which categorised Africans in South Africa along distinct linguistic lines he called 'tribes.' The tribe then became the unit of study, which also fuelled the misconception that South Africa was constituted by discrete cultures, and which should be treated as 'distinct political communities.' (p. 257). In South Africa this gave birth to what were to become 'tribal' Bantustans, each with its own language and culture.

In conclusion, this is well written book and should be a must read for all those interested in African languages and philology, history and anthropology. The book will also be of interest to scholars in the formation of African socio-political economy.