

Rites of Translation, Translation of Rites.

A study on cultural contact and *accomodatio* in Lesotho, c. 1833-1890

1. Abstract

Christian missionaries have for long time been among the main characters of what has been variously referred to as the encounter with the “other” and the “colonial encounter”. From the Benedictine monks sent by Gregorius I to convert the British islands, to the Jesuits involved in the evangelisation of Central and South America, to the Protestant and Catholic revival of foreign missions during the nineteenth century, missionaries walked on the edge between two worlds, the European homeland on one side, and unknow peoples on the other, experiencing manifold approaches and obtaining different outcomes. In every case, however, their involvement in the colonial expansion of Europe has been a much debated point.

More than twenty years ago, Jean and John Comaroff’s study on the Batswana gave a fundamental contribution over the role played by missionary societies during the colonial era in Africa. Their approach was to reject any simplistic affiliation to both imperial and anti-colonial forces, and to pinpoint a different, deeper form of colonialism, a “colonisation of consciousness” that aimed to the souls and minds of the African peoples¹ and that was typical of Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century. The general framework for this subtle explanation, however, was left unchanged, that is, “the meeting of two worlds, one imperial and expansive, the other local and defensive”². The missionaries, in other words, were responsible for making African people “less African”, and for furtively entangle them in imperial fabric.

The proposed paper will show that the inherent teleological element of the above mentioned explanation is at odds with dynamics of evangelisation in which the missionaries were constantly the weaker part in the power balance with local political authorities. We will focus on three micro-historical feats of the Christian missions in

¹ COMAROFF JEAN AND JOHN, *Of revelation and revolution. Vol. 1, Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1991, pp. 211 ff.

² COMAROFF, *Of revelation and revolution, Vol. 1*, p. 171.

Lesotho during the nineteenth century: the diffusion of baptism, marriage and politico-religious public rites. The coexistence of French Protestant and French Catholic missionaries will permit to compare the two approaches and to comment on their effectiveness, while taking a closer look at the translation of words, concepts and rites that was operated on both the missionary and African side will open up the discussion on the direction taken by the encounter itself. Rather than an act of colonialism, the translation of rites will be considered a form of negotiation between two equally “active” participants. In particular, the inclusion of consuetudinary cattle marriage in the Catholic rites, decided by *Propaganda Fide* on the basis of other past cases in the Far East, calls directly into question the debates on the Malabar and Chinese Rites.

In conclusion, the paper will discuss the concept of *accomodatio* as defined in the experiences of Roberto Nobili and Matteo Ricci and will propose it as a valid analytical tool for the history of cultural contact in South Africa, as opposed to the “colonisation of consciousness”.

2. Sources

The paper will be mainly based on the sources produced by the two missionary societies, the *Société des missions Évangéliques de Paris* and the *Congrégation des Oblats de Marie Immaculée*. I have already consulted the respective periodicals which published a great deal of missionary correspondence during the nineteenth century, and the Archives of the Oblates and of *Propaganda Fide*, both in Rome, while a trip to the SMEP Archive in Paris is planned for this Fall.

3. Bio

I was born in Milan on the 5/5/1990. In 2009 I obtained a degree in classical studies at the “Liceo Ginnasio Giuseppe Parini” with a mark of 99/100; in 2012 I graduated in History at the “Università degli Studi” in Milan (110/110 L) and I passed the competitive exam to get to the “Scuola Normale Superiore”. In 2014 I obtained the M.A. in History at the “Università degli Studi” in Pisa (110/110 L) and the “Diploma”

of the “Scuola Normale”. Since September 2014, I am a PhD student of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.