O. Missionary Science, Ethnic Formation and the Religious Encounter in Belgian Congo 1908-60
(2018-19: subject to minor change)

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Overview

Recent research in the history of African Christianity has expanded the notion of religious encounter by highlighting the role played by missionaries and Africans in the creation of so-called colonial knowledge. Missionary societies were responsible for much of the research about Africa before and during the establishment of university disciplines. Missionaries contributed to the development of subjects such as botany, cartography, photography, and zoology and were especially involved in anthropology, medicine and linguistics. Africans were also engaged in this work, placing their own ideas in texts through research and translation, through ‘calling the shots’ in ethnographic photography, and through capturing collectors in networks of artistic production and consumption.

This Special Subject will study the pioneering role played by missionaries and local agents in ethnography, collecting and linguistics and will examine the significance of their research in
the formation of new African identities. The approach will be to consider the encounter of the Plymouth Brethren, the American Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Congo Evangelistic Mission with the Luba speaking peoples of Katanga, a vast territory of 80,000 square miles, located in Eastern Belgian Congo. These Euro-American Protestant missions had a difficult relationship with a colonial state, which preferred to work with a monolithic Catholicism and was suspicious of Protestant denationalising activities and encouragement of destabilising indigenous prophetic movements. Luba identity possessed a strong pre-colonial resonance and was actively imagined in the 20th century by colonial officials, African intellectuals, missionaries and their African associates, eventually providing the basis for the Dutch Franciscan, Placide Temples’, influential Bantu Philosophy (1949). Initially privileged under Belgian colonialism, the Luba Katanga slowly lost ground to surrounding ethnic groups developing a culture of political tribalism that manifested itself in secessionist politics following independence.

**Key themes**

The teaching is organised around seven key themes, which are the subject of scholarly and popular debate:
1) The late 19th Century and colonial context of the missionary encounter: Swahili and Ovimbundu slaving, the violence of Belgian penetration and the pervasive use of ‘science’ to rehabilitate Belgian colonialism following the Red-Rubber Scandal and sleeping sickness;
2) The influence of the genres of Anglo-Saxon anthropology and Belgian ethno-museology and the intellectual networks that sustained them;
3) The theological motivation for missionary research;
4) The methodological processes involved in missionary ethnography, collecting and photography including trekking, observation and use of African porters, translators and research assistants;
5) The knowledge pathways created by the choice of informants - women in flight, recent converts, evangelists, freed slaves and traditional religious experts;
6) The texts in context, their local dissemination through scriptures, language primers, school history and Belgian administrative periodicals and the making of ethnic identity;
7) Placide Tempels and the creation of African theology and ethno-Philosophy

**The Sources**

A diverse and rich collection of sources is available in English: missionary correspondence with the colonial state, museums, universities and mission authorities; missionary publications, including monthly periodicals, hagiographies of missionaries and converts, and collections of fables and proverbs; published oral traditions; ethnographic texts published by the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa and the Central African Museum, Belgium; digitalised ethnographic photos, missionary magic lantern slides, paintings and sketches. These will be supplemented by transcriptions of interviews with African informants and translations of language primers and an African canonical History. All of these sources have been scanned and put on camtools.

**Teaching and Learning**

Given that most of you will be unfamiliar with the history of Africa and more specifically colonial Belgian Congo the paper will begin in Michaelmas Term with 9 informal lectures
with space for discussion. The lectures will address the context, key themes and the nature and content of the source material. These lectures will be supplemented with films (which will not be examined) on the history of colonial Belgian Congo. There will also be a 2 hour hands-on-session at the MAA led by Dr Chris Wingfield, who is Senior Curator in Archaeology and an expert on missionary collections.

In Lent Term the teaching and learning will take place through classes. These will be organised around student-led presentations. The classes will address issues of history, historiography and specific sources. Usually they will be organised around key or classic secondary texts. A group of you will be responsible for a specific class topic. The presentations will be a major task. I want presenters to produce a detailed hand-out, and make good use of white boards, projection facilities, images and texts. Those not presenting that week will also be expected to have read the primary and secondary texts for that week. I will introduce the class, steer the discussion (if necessary) and sum-up.

In addition there will be a series of intensive ‘gobbet’ (extract) classes working on the primary texts in Lent and Easter Terms. It will be assumed that everyone will have read the relevant set texts for that week. These classes will increasingly focus upon preparing for the gobbet and source exam and HAP.

Schedule for Lectures, Films and Classes

(Subject to amendment)

Michaelmas Term

Week 1
Lecture 1: Introduction 1: Themes and Explanations
Lecture 2: Introduction 2: Visual and Textual Sources

Week 2
Lecture 3: The Luba, Lunda and their Neighbours in West Central Africa 1870-1915
Film 1: Kongo EP1: La Course Effrénée [a documentary survey of the history of colonisation with subtitles]

Week 3
Lecture 4: Missions and the State in Belgian Congo 1908 -1950s
Discussion 1: Missionary Propaganda: Some Key Texts

Week 4
Lecture 5: Colonial Science: institutions, Networks and Publications
Lecture 6: The Origins and Nature of Missionary Science
Week 5
Lecture 7: Fieldwork methods and African Expertise: Missionaries and Africans in the Making of Colonial Knowledge
Film 2: *Kongo EP2: Les Grandes Illusions 1908-60* [a documentary survey of the era of Belgian Colonialism with subtitles]

Week 6
Visit to Museum and Archaeology and Anthropology: Two hour Class on Museums and Missionary Collections with Dr Chris Wingfield (Senior Curator, Archaeology, MAA)

Week 7
Lecture 8: Missionary Literacy and Science and Luba Ethnic Formation
Discussion 2: Missionary Ethnography and History: Some Key Texts

Week 8
Lecture: 9 Missionary Research, Bantu Philosophy, and African Theology
‘Introducing Gobbets’

*Lent Term*

Class 1 - The Luba polity and its collapse
Extract Work – Topic 1
Class 2 – Cultural Encounter: Adventurers and Missionaries and African Responses
Extract Work – Topic 2
Class 3 – The Encounter through Object and Image
Extract Work - Topic 3
Class 4 – Missions and the Belgian Colonial Project: Language, Labour, Health & Hygiene
Extract Work – Topic 4
Class 5 – Missionaries, Anthropologists and Curators
Extract Work – Topic 5
Class 6 – Missionary Anthropology and Secret Societies
Extract Work – Topic 6
Class 7 – Missionary Literacy and its Social Significance
Extract Work – Topic 7
Class 8 – African Art, Ethno-Philosophy and Theology
Extract Work – Topic 8

*Easter Term*
Specimen Long Essay Questions

1) Why did missionaries engage in colonial science in Belgian Congo?
2) What were the strengths and weaknesses of missionary research methods?
3) To what extent did missionaries’ African informants turn their gods into demons?
4) Why were African intellectuals so keen to collaborate with European researchers?
5) Does Placide Tempels’ *Bantu Philosophy* (1949) have any empirical basis?
6) Was missionary science knowledge for imperial domination?
7) To what extent did conversion to Christianity reflect an African quest for literacy?
8) What can historians learn from collections of photographs or material culture made by missionaries?
9) How did missionary research contribute to ethnic formation?
10) Does missionary participation in scientific research cause historians to revise their understanding of the religious encounter?

Bibliography and Sources

Abbreviations

AA – African Arts
AOGUSA – Assemblies of God Archives, Springfield, Missouri, USA
ARA – Annual Review of Anthropology
AQ – Anthropological Quarterly
AS – African Studies
ASR – African Studies Review
BHR – Brethren Historical Review
BS – Bantu Studies
CA – Critique of Anthropology
CuA – Current Anthropology
Cea – Cahiers d’études Africaines
CSH – Cahiers des sciences humaines
CEM – Congo Evangelistic Mission Archives Preston, Lancashire
CEMR – Congo Evangelistic Mission Report
CJAS – Canadian Journal of African Studies
DM – David Maxwell
DU – Drew University Archives (USA)
GJ – The Geographical Journal
1) The Opening Encounter in S.W. Belgian Congo

**Primary:**


Brethren Images (4 jpegs)


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