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Conversion and Conversation: The Paradoxes of Missionary Work¹

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Abstract

It is time to take stock of the theoretical and empirical contribution of J. and J. Comaroff's major work, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, two volumes of which have been published (with a third one forthcoming), which remains largely unknown to the French public. This historical anthropology of colonial evangelism focuses on the encounter between the Nonconformist missionaries of British origin and the Tswana of South Africa. The paradigm of colonial interaction applied to the period from 1820 to 1920 breaks with a one-sided reading in terms of domination and resistance, in order to better underscore the contradictions and ambivalences of each protagonist and the two-way relationship that formed the basis of the exchanges that occurred. But the dialogue of symbolic forms which underpinned the ideological dispute did not exclude the interplay of power relations, a subtle dialectic where the relationship between civilisation and evangelisation was negotiated in everyday life and material culture. The use of the notions of hegemony and ideology sheds particular light on the dual interplay of conversation and religious conversion, giving ample room to the "bricolages" and agency of the natives. This vast project started by the Comaroffs seeks to fulfil an ambitious desire for synthesis and draws on an "archival ethnography" which concerns both historians of colonialism and anthropologists of the contemporary.

Discipline : ANTHROPOLOGY

Keywords : TSWANA, CONVERSION, MISSIONARY WORK, HEGEMONY, COLONIAL INTERACTION

1 - Traduction originale de l'article d'André Mary paru initialement dans les *Cahiers d'Études africaines* en 2000. Voir MARY, André. 2000. Conversion et conversation : les paradoxes de l'entreprise missionnaire. *Cahiers d'études africaines*, Vol. 40, n°160, pp. 779-799.

Introduction

The debates on the “African conversion” (Mary, 1998) were started by Robin Horton’s theses on the “rationality” of the Nigerian Yoruba’s conversion to Christianity in the late 19th century after the establishment of Islam. Horton’s intellectualist – or what we would nowadays call cognitivist – reading of collective conversion phenomena focuses on the translation into religious terms of the change in living environment from the village world to the colonial macrocosm. The adoption of monotheism was supposed to be nothing more than a form of pragmatic adaptation of mental structures that help manage everyday life to the new market world. In this reconversion of schemas interpreting the event of “colonial encounter”, John Peel, like others, puts forward the principle of what he calls “the epistemological priority of interaction”: “For us, the traditional religion does not come first, but instead the encounter of the pastor and the *babalawo*” (Peel, 1990).

Terence Ranger, a historian of African religions from the same school of historical anthropology, takes the same perspective as J. Peel in his approach to the dialectic of the conversion of the Shona and the development of “Black” Methodism in Zimbabwe: “At any one time, and even today, popular Methodism is the result of an interaction between missionary and convert” (Ranger, 1994). Thinking of African conversion in terms of interaction means at the very least bringing the missionary enterprise and its message into play, rather than limiting oneself to the “indigenous reinterpretation” of Christian myths and their sociodicy in local cosmogonies.

But the most significant illustration of this paradigm of colonial interaction in the field of an anthropology of missions and conversions in Africa remains J. and J. Comaroff’s monographic work *Of Revelation and Revolution* (1991, 1997). Revelation *and* revolution, or the missionary revelation of the evangelical message as a social and symbolic revolution of forms of life. In response to historical criticisms of their emphasis

on “missionary narratives”, the authors have insisted at length on the dialogue around forms of life within mission territories, which concerned itself more with everyday gestures, the confrontation of habitus in matters of hygiene, or the familiarity of the architecture of buildings, than the preaching and power of the Word².

The trivialisation of the paradigm of colonial interaction, or its euphemistic translation in terms of “conversation” or even “encounter”, has over time erased the entire dialectical dimension of the epistemological rupture it represented. The legacy of Hosbawn’s and T. Ranger’s “inventing traditions” is obviously essential, but its “situated” historical relevance has been too quickly drowned out by the professions of faith of a Tradition’s traditionalism that is still alive and reactivated, whereas, for our historians, this inventiveness of traditions referred, above all, to the various forms of transfer and importation of artefacts from the Anglo-Saxon imperial world, which were reappropriated by the indigenous worlds, as illustrated by the Crown jewels or the famous Papuan cricket. Legacy here goes hand in hand with the making and artificiality of fabrication, but, for J. Peel, “making the Yoruba” owes more to the matrix, the mould, of biblical religiosity than to the ancestral traditions revisited by Nigerian scholars. For their part, the Comaroffs place great emphasis on the dialectic of the local and the global in the configuration and construction of identities, which is hardly surprising for these intellectuals who hail from South African universities and have spent time at the London School of Economics and Chicago anthropology department (Comaroff and Morier-Genoud, 2011).

But the core of the “conversation” paradigm is the dialogue or dialogic of forms, to use Bakhtin’s terms (Bakhtin, 1981) dear to the Comaroffs, in a word, the dialectic of embodied form and informed matter. The driving force behind this dialectic of hybridity is what is missing from a theology of inculturation which turns culture, and particularly foreign cultures,

2 - See my remarks in footnote 3 to the attached text on their lengthy response to critics in Volume II of *Of Revelation and Revolution* (1997), p. 36-53.

into a simple “form of expression” freed from the risks of an interpretation rooted in the bodily movements of rites or the material, polymorphic substantiality of objects³. The dialogic of hybridation presupposes a coexistence of and an oblique negotiation between two “opposing linguistic intentions” within the same utterance (Chauvet, 1997).

In their later work on South African Pentecostalism, the Comaroffs “converted”, so to speak, to the idea of the “privatisation” of religious identities (Comaroff, 2002) and the “commodification” of the Millennium within the new capitalist market of salvation, but their attention to Foucault’s techniques of the self, from confession to deliverance, has not led them – quite the contrary – to ignore the structures that make possible and give meaning to the process of subjectivating belief, or provide resources to the agency of subjects.

Of Revelation and Revolution, this great panorama of the history of colonial evangelism and the conversion of South Africa’s Tswana to modernity, is undoubtedly the greatest work of the Comaroffs (Jean and John L.). The two volumes published to date – *Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa, Vol. I*, 1991, and *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier, Vol. II*, 1997 –, of the three announced⁴, have become landmarks in the historical anthropology of colonialism and have already fuelled much debate beyond the circle of Africanists. The parallel publication, in 1992, of *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992a) and, in 1993, of *Modernity and Its Malcontents* (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993), as well as many articles partly reprinted in volume II⁵ – with the latter including responses to the numerous criticisms raised by volume I –, confirms the fact that this is really a vast and unfinished work in progress, unfolding over a long period

3 - Few theologians steeped in anthropological culture are sensitive to the pitfalls of the language of inculturation; see, among others, CHAUVET, Louis-Marie. 1997. *Les Sacrements, Parole de Dieu au risque du corps*. Paris, Les Éditions de l’Atelier, Éditions ouvrières.

4 - The third volume is meant to deal with education and schooling.

5 - Some of the chapters in Volume II were written at the same time as Volume I and were subsequently the subject of various communications and exchanges, see Vol. II, p. 427, footnote 72.

of time and over several fronts at one and the same time. The historical period covered, particularly in volume II, runs from 1820 to 1920, but volume I explores at length the context and prehistory of the “colonial encounter” as well as the misunderstandings of Christianisation, while the analyses of the global process taking place throughout the 19th century make constant reference to the social and political issues of South African modernity and the apartheid regime.

Between ethnography and history: a “neomodern” stance

J. and J. Comaroff adopt an intellectual stance and writing style which link them to the University of Chicago’s school of historical anthropology, with its major figures such as M. Sahlins and A. Appadurai, or G. Stocking and R. Darnton. This involves taking the full measure of the critical message of postmodernism in anthropology, without nevertheless giving up understanding the ways in which collective worlds are made and the various forms historical agency takes, while drawing on the resources of anthropology and social history, and therefore of ethnographic investigation and archives. None of the divisions that make up the great narratives of modernity, from evolutionism to positivism, nor any of the founding dualisms of social sciences, from functionalism to structuralism, are self-evident any longer, but the response to this blurring of our points of reference is to combine, rather than overcome, these dichotomies or antinomies, for the sake of analytical efficiency and the search for intelligibility, in other words, of constantly linking structure and event, culture and power, consciousness and ideology, system and interaction. As critical fidelity to the notion of culture shows, throwing the baby out with the bathwater is out of the question:

[We] take culture to be the semantic space, the field of signs and practices, in which human beings construct and represent themselves and others, and hence their societies and histories. It is not merely an abstract order of signs, or relations among signs. Nor is it just the sum of habitual practices. Neither *pure langue* nor *pure parole*, it never constitutes a closed, entirely coherent system. Quite the contrary: Culture always contains within it

polyvalent, potentially contestable messages, images, and actions. It is, in short, a historically situated, historically unfolding ensemble of signifiers-in-action, signifiers at once material and symbolic, social, and aesthetic. Some of these, at any moment in time, will be woven into more or less tightly integrated, relatively explicit worldviews; others may be heavily contested, the stuff of counterideologies and “subcultures”; yet others may become more or less unfixed, relatively free floating, and indeterminate in their value and meaning (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992a).

Hence the claim to a kind of well-tempered theoretical eclecticism, a scholarly “bricolage” of tools of analysis, combines the dialectic of forces and the dialogue of forms in order to respond to the challenge of a fundamentally hybrid colonial reality and to identify the springs of historical agency at the very heart of the subjects’ everyday lives. The anthropological thought and writing in this work take their sustenance from freely borrowed contributions of Foucauldian archaeology of “discursive formations”, from Bakhtin’s “heteroglossia”, and from Gramsci’s “hegemony of forms”; the authors allow themselves to correct P. Bourdieu’s “practice” by resorting to A. Giddens’s “agency” or M. de Certeau’s poetics of “everyday life”, and they readily quote philosophers: Arendt, Derrida, Taylor. The style of their discursive practice constantly seeks to account for the complexity and reflexivity of the process of “colonisation of consciousness and consciousness of colonisation” and does not hesitate to embrace the hybridity of its subject by mixing together terms: political economy of salvation, missionary medicine, witchcraft, and modernity.

This work “is neither an event history of ‘the colonisation of the Southern Tswana’ nor a chronicle of the indigenisation of Christianity”, but rather a historical ethnography of colonial evangelism (Vol. II, p. 411), which has inevitably upset both traditional ethnologists and classical African historians, there being no shortage of criticisms. Ethnologists accustomed to thinking in terms of dualism and resistance by precolonial societies find it difficult to accept the idea that the identity of the Setswana world, whilst not a pure invention, is strongly contemporary with the encounter with

the ways of the Whites (*sekgoa*). The complementary opposition between the two worlds was historically constructed against the background of a constant hybridation of forms of life, while Methodist-inspired missionary Christianity, itself strongly reshaped by its African experience, may be one of the constitutive matrices of South African identity today, as well as of its social divisions. For their part, historians are not too happy about the unwelcome intrusion of these intellectuals steeped in “postmodern” literary and philosophical references into their own field. When going beyond the ethnographic present, which they have especially experienced since the late 1960s, these anthropologists claim to practise what they call “archival ethnography”, reading in the most minute detail – and often over the shoulders of the natives – between the lines of the subjects’ material and domestic lives, more so than their oral traditions, the clues to a global process of their “conversion” to modernity⁶.

The paradoxes of colonial interaction

In a decisive contribution to the debate on “African conversion” started by R. Horton, J. Peel already put forward, in the context of Nigeria and the conversion of the Yoruba, what he called “the epistemological priority of interaction”: “For us, the traditional religion does not come first, but instead the encounter of the pastor and the *babalawo*.” T. Ranger takes the same view in his approach to the dialectic of the conversion of the Shona and the development of “Black” Methodism in Zimbabwe: “At any one time, and even today, popular Methodism is the result of an interaction between missionary and convert” (Ranger 1994). However, the most significant illustration of this paradigm of colonial interaction

6 - The introduction to Volume II: 36-53 returns to the main criticisms made by Africanist historians, distinguishing between the constructive criticism of J. Peel and T. Ranger and the deliberate misunderstanding by J. Vansina, who denounced the “postmodernist” and “interpretative” excesses of this reading. It should be said that the text on which J. Vansina’s accusation of overinterpretation focuses (an accusation partly taken up by Peel), which is chapter 6, “The Madman and the Migrant”, of their book *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, is precisely (and rather unfortunately) one of the few writings by J. and J. Comaroff that have so far been translated into French (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992b).

in the field of an anthropology of missions and conversions remains the work of J. and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*.

This study looks at the encounter and confrontation between the so-called “Tswana”, the people of present-day southern Botswana (and more particularly the Tshidi), and the Nonconformist evangelical missionaries of British origin who settled in this region from 1820 onwards. To that end, it takes into account the local interaction between two communities, each with its own historicity and world, within the cultural constraints and global movement of their own societies. The missionaries were envoys of the London Missionary Society (founded in 1795), belonging to Congregationalist churches who had always put up resistance to and been in conflict with the Anglican Church. Theirs was a Puritan Calvinist religious culture: a “convert” was “chosen” by God and bore witness to the absolute power of the Holy Spirit. They were highly influenced by the Wesleyan “awakening” of the second half of the 18th century and by the enthusiasm of a Methodism that was both rational and emotional, which espoused a pragmatic theology of the Power of the Spirit and a utopia that was both reformist and antimodernist. When the first four missionaries landed in 1798, their attempt to evangelise the Blacks in the Cape Colony immediately met with opposition from the first white colony set up by Dutch settlers (the Boers), as well as with reservations from the Dutch Reformed Church, which was itself hostile to any missionary work among the Blacks. When, in 1821, they were granted permission to settle among the Tswana, beyond the “colonial frontier”, they found themselves in an uncomfortable and contradictory in-between position: they represented the interests of the indigenous population who were subjected to Boer hostility, and at the same time they were the vanguard of the British presence and European civilisation. The terms “encounter” or “conversation” used to describe a confrontational situation, which was not without violence and coercion, may surprise and seem to make some concession to a certain revisionism. However, this encounter is precisely thought of as an “interaction”, that is, both a dialectical process (there was contradiction, conflict, struggle, against

a backdrop of domination and resistance) and a dialogical exchange in the sense defined by Bakhtin (there was negotiation, domestication, on both sides and at several levels, and, if we wish, “conversation”). Once it is accepted that such a process is not globally predetermined by the relationship between interacting forces or subject to a linear teleology, it can even be said that J. and J. Comaroff take it for granted that the dialectic of social forces encompasses the dialogue of symbolic forms⁷.

To speak of interaction is in fact, firstly, to break with a univocal reading of colonialism as a process of economic and political domination, as a movement controlled by forces or structures or directed by agents of the capitalist state, or as a system of unilateral conversion of subordinate subjects, with its ideological corollary of resistance or refusal by the dominated. The idea is that the simple equation of domination and resistance does not allow us to grasp the complexity of the colonial situation. Interaction denotes a process of mutual influencing between the partners facing each other and of connecting the political, economic, cultural dimensions at stake. The colonial experience was above all uncertain, indeterminate, local, as well as global. Afterwards, neither of them would be identical to itself, and it is paradoxically in this calling into question that each of them discovered its specificity. This redefinition presupposes a certain principle of symmetry and reciprocity which fully allows for the natives’ agency, without however erasing the fact of domination and alienation.

Colonisation, therefore, is not the export of a preconstructed, predefined culture and ideology. Both the evangelists and the Tswana were undoubtedly heirs to different cultures, but in the course of this encounter they were led to redefine each other, to rethink the meaning of the event as well as the status of the White or Black other. Thus, colonial evangelism was not a given before the encounter, it was a theological and liturgical development negotiated in that particular situation. The

7 - This is a point which the conclusion to Volume II seeks to clarify: “The historical anthropology of colonialism ought to address itself to dialectics than just to dialogics...” (Vol. II, p. 410).

fundamental and paradoxical link between the evangelisation of souls and the civilisation of mores was not really conceptualised. Its complement, “paganism” and its avatars, did not exist in and of itself: it was a product of the missionary gaze and speculations, but also of the integration of the gaze of the other by those “cultural mediators”, the “indigenous” catechists. The sphere of *medicines*, the locus *par excellence* of the Whites’ secrets, and the famous missionary medicine of Dr Livingstone particularly illustrate this mutual exchange of substances, remedies, and know-how, where the Whites’ feeling of superiority coexisted all the more easily with the fascination for indigenous medicines as Western knowledge in this field was not, in the early 19th century, so far removed from African conceptions of bodily humours and health as a balance.

Nor did the colonisers bring historical consciousness and a sense of universal history to peoples who had none. The Tswana did not enter history in the early 19th century with the arrival of the missionaries; instead, they had their own historical consciousness which was expressed in their way of inhabiting the world, their bodies, and their houses, and of situating themselves in time – a more or less explicit consciousness which was challenged by the utopian and imperialist enterprise of colonial evangelism. The “colonisation of consciousness” always went hand in hand with a consciousness of colonisation, and the early negotiations testify to the Tswana chiefs’ lucidity about the subversive power of the missionary settlement on their land. The entire history of the religious movements that subsequently emerged bears witness to the search for new forms of consciousness and action.

For its part, the colonial enterprise cannot be understood on the basis of the rationality it ascribed itself; capitalist culture also functioned in a “magical”, “fetishistic” way, embodying an enchantment of the world and superstitious beliefs in its attempts to expand and reproduce itself. Colonial history is a lesson in ethnography which forces us to look at our own world as a problem. The singular historical consciousness of our missionaries was undoubtedly expressed in the form of “narrative realism” through biographical accounts, diaries, confessions – and the

missionaries had a lot to tell – but also in the way they arranged their environment, treated their bodies, dressed, dwelt, and decorated the mission walls. It was thus different forms of regime and expression of historical consciousness that confronted each other.

Colonial experimentation was not marginal, it did not operate only at the frontier, the periphery. The encounter with Africa as an enigma of conversion (or nonconversion) in turn changed the global orientation of evangelisation and the examination of the meaning of the biblical message. Missionary diagnoses also helped develop a medical discourse on African health and pathology, which in turn influenced “metropolitan” medical science⁸. The hybridity of the colonial world, and the fascination it aroused, even altered the foundations of the London bourgeois ethos, and helped shape the image of modernity. Hence the (entirely relative) “dialectical” relativisation of the centre and the periphery, the global and the local, universalism and particularism. Giving in to postmodernist relativism on this point, the Comaroffs like to show us Tswana people who were very “open”, not very respectful of their traditions, curious about others’ know-how and secrets, always ready to borrow and accumulate, in a word, rather “multiculturalist” natives, who came up against missionaries with universalist claims, “confined” in a regime of “revealed” truth, seeking to assign others to their identity and ethnic purity.

In reality, this interaction involved multiple worlds and operated at several levels. There were no homogeneous attitudes or responses from either the Tswana or the White world. Thus, the latter was represented as much by the colonial state as by the plurality of agents of empire (missionaries, traders, etc.), whose interests were both complementary and contradictory. The colonial state needs to be understood in two senses: both as a “political order”, a formal system of governance, and as a “condition of existence” which challenges ideas and values as much as the material forms of everyday life: bodies and gestures, houses and

8 - See chap. 7, *The Medicine of God's Word*. p. 323-364 (Vol. II).

habits. It was the whole of practical culture (the practical sense, the habitus in the sense defined by P. Bourdieu) that informed everyday life, the ways of being and inhabiting the world that were under construction and led to the fabrication of new subjects. And what needs thinking about (and expressing in a corresponding style of writing) is not only the relationship between economic, political, and religious dimensions, but also the inseparability, the mixing of these “realities”: Christian (evangelical) political economy linked the salvation of the soul to hygiene and treating the body, sanctification to cleanliness and the aesthetics of clothing as well as to individual and ownership and the ethics of gain and work, in other words, it linked redemption to the agrarian revolution and petty-bourgeois civilisation.

Colonial interaction was more profoundly built on a dialectic of appropriation and accommodation, as much as of conflict and resistance, which largely involved the exchange of objects and nonverbal signs. The hybrid products generated by this “complex equation of exchange and synthesis” (Vol. II, p. 358) not only have an exotic value, but also testify to deeply intertwined worlds, as illustrated by the practices of mutual borrowing of remedies, therapeutic recipes, and pharmacological substances, or “bricolages” of Christian ritual. The colonial encounter is “that curious mix of consent and contestation, desire and disgust, appropriation and accommodation, refusal and refiguration, ethnicisation and hybridation” (Vol. II, p. 22). One of the greatest paradoxes, highlighted by the Comaroffs – a warning against the enchantments of miscegenation –, is that dualisms and ethnic and racial divides (White/Black, Christian/pagan), the essentialisation of infinitesimal differences and the attendant instances of violence, develop against a backdrop of syncretisms and hybridations. The best example is provided by those “cultural brokers”, catechists or assistant preachers among others, who, by finding themselves at the interface, were both a challenge to racial boundaries and the best markers of difference, while enabling the shift and redefinition of the divides (Vol. II, p. 78).

Ultimately, if we are to understand how interaction and domination

worked together, we need to recognise that unintended effects, contradictions, and paradoxes lay at the heart of each actor's endeavours: "Contradictory consciousness' may be one key to the creation and perpetuation of relations of domination" (Vol. I, p. 26). Thus, the evangelists' missionary enterprise took its inspiration from a ruralist utopia of moral reform, in strong reaction against industrial and capitalist modernity and in search of complicity with a preserved Africa. The letters of these missionaries testify to their aspiration to create (or recreate) a peasant Protestant Christianity in Africa, protected from the excesses of commercial civilisation and manufacturing. However, everything would lead them to behave, in their everyday practices in matters of hygiene and medication, clothing and housing, architecture and agriculture, as the best agents of Western modernity and market culture, and to prepare the proletarianisation that they denounced at home. The peasant smallholders they had dreamt of would go on to sustain the township population and serve as labour for the mining industry (Vol. II, p. 163-164). This objective contradiction was not unrelated to the ambiguity of their message and the constant ambivalence of their attitudes. Although their profession of faith testified to a promised redemption of souls and bodies, while insistently denying the importance of the flesh, their practices were ultimately obsessed with a concern for the nakedness of the Black body, the need to wash and clothe it, and strove to carefully separate body and spirit (Vol. II, p. 342). Whilst their preaching associated material wellbeing with moral merit and equality before the law of the Lord, their enterprise helped establish a colonial world founded on division, inequality, and exploitation. From a more legal point of view, they advocated both a liberalism that encouraged every individual member of the empire to free themselves from "natural" constraints and to access "private" property, and a communitarianism that assigned African peoples to the status of ethnic subjects bound by the regime of community rights.

The ultimate paradox of the missionary enterprise is that its agents would fail where they thought they would succeed, which was evangelisation,

and succeed in spite of themselves in what was not in principle their project or their priority, namely, civilisation. This is illustrated remarkably, but not without misunderstanding, by the subtle dialectic of conversion and conversation.

The ideology of conversion and the hegemony of conversation

The term “conversation” (“kind conversation”) was borrowed by J. and J. Comaroff, not without humour and irony, from D. Livingstone (Vol. I, p. 198), but it can be the source of serious misinterpretation. The metaphor of “long conversation” – for it is very much a metaphor that conceals a concept – initially acquires heuristic value⁹ only in a dialectical and critical confrontation with the religious category of “conversion”, as illustrated in chapter 6 of volume I, “Conversion and Conversation: Narrative, Form, and Consciousness”.

For the evangelists, “conversion” (in the strong sense of “baptism of the Spirit”) did not really involve “dialogue”, the exchange of ideas or arguments, a strategy of persuasion aimed at convincing the other of the truth or rationality of Christian doctrine. The spirit of Wesleyan Methodism was profoundly alien and even hostile to the order of reasons, rational argument, and theological speculation. The only thing that counted was the evidence of the Spirit’s power, the experience of its immediate manifestations, spiritual and material, and, among its primary manifestations, “the conviction of sin”. The expected conversion had less to do with adherence to a Truth than with a “change of life”, a change of being that led to the convert being “born again”. It was therefore in the “ordinary” life, in a methodical and systematic organisation of existence in accordance with “God’s plan”, that converts recognised themselves. It was in their bodily habits and work discipline that their “sanctification” showed. The Nonconformists’ initial evangelical message was therefore

9 – Footnote 73 in chapter I, Volume II at least clarifies that, “in speaking of ‘the long conversation’ between Tswana and Europeans, we mean to include not only verbal interactions but also bodily gestures, exchanges of objects, and various other communicative acts” (Vol. II, p. 428).

both committed and pragmatic, subversive and relatively aggressive. The ideology of conversion was based on the war declared against the powers of darkness and, in this war, the evil, satanic other was the “pagan”. The first task of colonial evangelism was the demonisation of cultural difference. A good Christian could not live naked, dirty, in huts, etc.

All conditions were thus met for the Nonconformists’ missionary enterprise to take on the dimension of an ideological conflict and a cultural war (a “war of minds”), with no possibility of compromise or ecclesial mediation like in Anglicanism or Catholicism. In a way, that is what it was. And, under the anthropologist’s retrospective gaze, it appears, once again, that the Tswana’s “pagan” ideology was rather more open, more ready to discuss, to argue (about, among other things, polygamy or circumcision), more willing and apt to borrow and to accumulate knowledge, know-how, and abilities (concerning remedies, the plough, or wells).

To understand the heuristic significance of the metaphor of “long conversation” it is necessary to bring into play another plane, another level of exchange than that of the substantial content of the evangelical message or the explicit (Pauline) ideology of conversion, to place oneself on the terrain of the “dialogue of forms” (Vol. I, p. 199), a paradigm or concept largely inspired by the analyses of M. Sahlins. What made such a dialogue possible was, on the one hand, the constant gap between the content of what was said, transmitted, or undertaken, and the signifying, prediscursive, spatial, and material forms which defined the “terms” of the encounter, and, on the other hand, the fact that the ways of saying and transmitting the message, the signs but also the practices and objects mobilised, exceeded the content or the intention of the message, and possibly “said” something other than what was meant. As J. and J. Comaroff put it: “It is often the telling that is as significant as the tale itself” (Vol. I, p. 36).

The duality of the missionary enterprise should not, therefore, be reduced to the objective contradiction that could arise between the religious message (the primacy of the power of the Spirit, equality before the law of God) and the technical, material culture of the world of merchandise and

capitalist accumulation, to which the bearers of the message belonged, in short, between the Bible on the one hand and the plough or the well on the other. Such a logic of the “double bind” of form and content was at the heart of the religious system itself, as illustrated by the well-known paradox of the demonisation of genies and ancestral spirits, a demonisation that both condemned the latter in the name of the exclusive superiority of the Christian God and supported their existence and demonic force (Meyer, 1999).

This “double bind” obviously worked both ways. The Tswana appropriated the Bible and found in this mythical history, particularly in the descriptions of the tribes and their mores, arguments in defence of their own way of life, their “custom”. These experts in biblical quotations would point out that Solomon was very much a polygamist or that circumcision was perfectly legitimate in the Jewish tradition. That said, by arguing in defence of the content of their traditions in this way, the Tswana were at the same time adopting the terms (in this case, the forms) of missionary arguments, appropriating a mode of legitimisation based on mastering the great myth that was the Bible, and sanctioning the shift in the locus of authority.

The dialectic of hegemony and ideology

The gap between the signifying forms and the intention of the message thus enabled a dialogue of forms between the two worlds facing each other, encouraging a kind of cultural osmosis or hybridation of forms, which in the long run overcame cultural confrontations and ideological resistance. The constant contradiction between explicit intentions and implicit practices, between the meanings conveyed and the signifiers (images or symbols) used, between the values displayed and the ways of life practised, would lead to the paradox that, in the end, the material and symbolic forms of Western culture (architectural forms and bodily representations, medical knowledge and agricultural production) would be the object of a slower, but more secure, native appropriation than the terms of the evangelical message, which would remain generally misunderstood or rejected. And this despite the gradual adjustments of

the missionary strategy which, especially towards the end of the 19th century, shifted from a triumphant evangelism that relied on the power of the word to the virtues of pedagogy. It was as if, faced with a situation of failure, the ideology of conversion became well and truly converted to an ideology of “conversation”, promoted as such by certain missionary agents including D. Livingstone.

The conceptualisation of these two levels or poles of the encounter which opened up for the colonial interaction a space for playing and negotiating at the very heart of domination, explicitly borrows its terms from the dialectics of hegemony and ideology dear to Gramsci. The entire introduction to Vol. I is devoted to the theoretical elucidation of this very complex dialectic. In France, there is little appreciation of the importance of the debates and multiple reinterpretations sparked by the concept of hegemony within American historical anthropology¹⁰, and it comes somewhat as a surprise that the most ground-breaking Anglo-Saxon social-science research has reopened theoretical debates reminiscent of those of the post-Marxist and poststructuralist period of the 1970s, particularly around the relationship between culture, power, and ideology¹¹.

What is at stake is indeed understanding how the consciousness of a population such as the Tswana was made and remade, how certain cultural practices and meanings were accepted as self-evident, while others were met with resistance. The coupled concepts of hegemony and ideology aim to identify two states, two possible modes of a culture, associated with two types of domination and social control. On the one hand, there is the hegemony that designates the implicit, prediscursive forms,

10 - On this subject, see the excellent clarification by V. Donald Kurtz (1996). The author reminds us that Gramsci's notion of hegemony in his *Prison Notebooks (1926-1937)* refers to an essentially moral, political, and cultural leadership, which is removed from any domination achieved through coercion and violence, and is supported by the work of intellectuals. It was Gwyn Williams who, in the 1960s and 1970s, gave this notion its anthropological meaning, with the weight of cultural tradition, the power relations present in cultural forms, taking precedence over the role of intellectuals. The theme of the “natives” capacity for initiative and the importance of “cultural mediators” nevertheless echo the original meaning of the Gramscian paradigm.

11 - One thinks of, among other things, the theoretical elaboration of the notion of the ideological, in tension with that of ideology, by M. Augé, and the debate with E. Terray (Terray, 1978).

whose naturalness and obviousness mean that they become established by themselves and constitute the fabric of the community consensus. And, on the other hand, there is the ideology that refers to the articulated contents of a discourse argued and conveyed by agents, which arouses commitment and contestation, domination and resistance. But, of course, these two poles form a continuum. If hegemony is shared, the consensus it creates is nourished by ambiguities, by polyvalent signifiers that mask contradictions. If hegemony is accepted as natural, its stability in the face of ideological challenges is achieved at the cost of great flexibility within a fluid and fragmented set of constraints. Finally, if the hegemonic forms are implicit, they carry meaning (like the architectural forms of the mission station which form a “text”) and can at any point be made explicit and dialectic by revealing their contradictions. Ideology questions and endangers hegemony, which thus takes the risk of submitting to the necessity of arguing and negotiating. Thus, tradition becomes traditionalist, ideological, which was the fate of the Tswana customary order. Conversely, what was only a dominant ideology – or even a minority one, as with the Nonconformists’ Methodist evangelicalism – can end up being a new “given”, a new order of things governing the whole of people’s everyday lives¹². It should be said that the peculiarity of the Methodist ideology of conversion, which measured faith and election against the change of life manifested in the systematic organisation of ordinary existence, was to facilitate this “hegemonisation” or “routinisation” of the new ideology. What matters is the dialectic that developed in a given historical situation between the power of reproduction of the hegemonic forms of a culture and the power of domination by the agents of an ideology. It is in the liminal space between the two poles, where hegemony is embodied in ritualised and institutional forms, and ideology in signifying semantic contents, that hegemony, through the power of tradition and ideology, through the

12 - Volume II devotes a long introductory section (Vol. II, p. 29-35) to the paradigm of “everyday” life (“The Everyday as Epiphany”), which casts a different light on the concept of hegemony while constituting the content of a new ideology, the – quoting Taylor – “naturalised habitat” of the modern subject”.

discourse of contestation, engages in a negotiation aimed at producing a new hegemony. The dialectic of hegemony and ideology is particularly apparent in a historical situation of cultural in-betweenness or social interaction like colonisation. In this truly “discursive experiment”, the hegemonic forms, conveyed by the agents of one culture, come into confrontation with those of another world via ideological struggles for domination. It is then that the gap between ideological contents and hegemonic forms, inherent to each of the interacting cultures – the possibility of a “double bind” exemplarily evoked in relation to the missionary enterprise –, provides one of the keys to the change and negotiation underway. The ambiguities of some echo the misunderstandings of others, thereby facilitating the osmosis of hegemonic forms and ideological “bricolage”.

The logic of accumulation and spiritual “bricolage”

There is nothing predetermined or unilinear about such a complex process, and it leaves plenty of room for the subjects’ historical agency. What emerges from the various discourses (letters, diaries, reports) or from the accounts of the actors’ dialogues or testimonies is the importance of the initiatives and mediations of the subjects representing the collective consciousness, engaged in the negotiation and permanent redefinition of the meaning and value of their practices. The issue, already mentioned, of religious conversion, which is presented as an individual event, a marker of biographical identity, while at the same time constituting a change of social and collective identity, is, in this respect, a privileged analyser which requires us to expand our analytical tools. It should be remembered that conversion cases among Tswana subjects remained rather rare and uncertain throughout the first part of the 19th century, but that the great mass of the population was as alien to the position of firm or masked refusal (adopted by some chiefs) as to that of full and complete adherence to the status of “convert” (*modumedi*, “one who agrees”). Instead, most of the Tswana engaged in this “long conversation” with the churchmen about the ways and know-how of the Whites (*sekgoa*), in complete ignorance, incomprehension, or irony with regard to the terms of the Protestant

ideology of conversion as a personal and sincere choice, a firm response to a clear alternative, or a radical and irreversible break with the “custom” (*setswana*).

The notion of “conversation” takes over from that of “conversion” to reflect “the highly variable, usually gradual, often implicit, and demonstrably ‘syncretic’ manner in which the social identities, cultural styles, and ritual practices of African peoples were transformed by the evangelical encounter” (Vol. I, p. 250). To put the term “syncretism” in inverted commas here, while taking it up again, is both to take one’s distance from the presuppositions of its missionary use (syncretism for churchmen was worse than refusal, it was ignorance of the alternative and of the rupture, the choice of not choosing) and to designate a complex set of processes which can only be illuminated by having recourse to a kind of pluralism or eclecticism of models of intelligibility¹³. In chapter 6 of Volume I, the authors employ at least four major paradigms. Firstly, even for those who “chose the church”, recasting the missionary message in the forms of *setswana* remained, we are told, the rule. This is the famous reinterpretation inherited from cultural anthropology, which Sundkler himself extensively used in his time through the metaphor of “the new wine [...] poured into old wineskins” (Vol. I, p. 247). More subtle and ambiguous, often present in the discourse of chiefs or rainmakers, was the logic of the coexistence and accumulation of “medicines” as well as of gods, whilst paying due respect to their geographical locations: the God of the Whites was from the south, the God of the Tswana was from the north. It was a logic presented both as a form of “cultural relativism”, cosmopolitanism before its time, and as the expression of a Tswana worldview which “fostered a highly acquisitive and eclectic disposition toward cultural exchange” (Vol. I, p. 246). However, the otherness the Tswana came up against in the challenge posed by the world of the Whites was recognised as imposing “a hitherto unfamiliar notion of

13 - On this point, given the obvious convergence of approaches to this phenomenon, I would like to refer to my own work (Mary, 1999).

difference”. Another possible response which is more committed to building compromises, but whose manifestations are long-term, is assimilation by “correspondence”, which is remarkably illustrated by the extreme legalism of Tswana Christianity: “[This] legalism emerging from the articulation, under particular historical conditions, of two cultures that placed complementary weight on rules and conventions in establishing membership in, and shaping the life of, any community” (Vol. I, p. 247).

But none of these classic instances of selective appropriation really captures the dialectic of form and content, sign and object, that lies at the root of the emergence of Tswana Christianity. What is most important to understand is the way in which the Tswana, who thought they could simply use the powers and knowledge of the Whites as they wished while keeping their distance from European control, “became increasingly enmeshed in the forms of *sekgoa*, despite contesting the explicit message of the mission”:

[...] as the process unfolded, a new set of implicit forms – unremarked ways of seeing and being, of construing and representing the world – were beginning to insinuate themselves into the worldview of the Tlhaping and Rolong. And they were doing so, often unrecognised, amidst all the ideological arguments and contests of images. Not, we stress, in spite of those arguments, but because of them. It is our contention that the very structure of the long conversation itself was a crucial vehicle by means of which those forms took root, bearing with them the hegemonic signs and practices of European culture. (Vol. I, p. 246)

We have already noted the Tswana’s unrestrained engagement with the debates on polygamy or circumcision, within the rhetorical forms of argumentation and biblical expertise, thereby confirming the authority of the written word. The long conversation, started from the outset by the “rainmakers” on the topic of controlling water and digging wells, provides another remarkable illustration of this internalisation of the terms of the challenge posed by the missionaries, and, in this case, of a certain way of rationalising the debate by using empirical knowledge and

experimental reasoning (Vol. I, p. 213).

This dialogue of forms, which takes place through the pre-constrained nature of the materials collected or of the contents argued, directly evokes what C. Lévi-Strauss called “bricolage”, a conceptual metaphor of which J. and J. Comaroff have always made extensive use. Volumes I and II offer wonderful examples and analyses of successful ritual bricolages of a liturgy that aimed to capture the power of Christian ritual, putting it at the service of visible efficacy and tangible redemption (Vol. II, p. 97-98). Beginning in 1830, Tswana prophets and visionaries (*baperofeti*) would recompose Christian words and indigenous gestures, inventing rites that synthesised the magic of word and action, charismatic pragmatism, and magical ritualism, and producing many hybrid products. It is worth recalling that it was Jean Comaroff who, in this respect, first employed the “bricolage” paradigm in its most scholarly sense (as a dialectic of paradigmatic associations and syntagmatic revaluations) in relation to the subversive ritual inventions of the Tshidi Zionist prophets (Comaroff, 1985, p. 197-198).

Chapter 2 of Volume II (“Preachers and Prophets”) resituates the initiatives of a few brilliant but isolated “bricoleurs” who left their mark on the period of observation and negotiation in the first part of the 19th century, within the movement of mass entry into the missions that developed at the end of the century, describing it as a vast enterprise of domesticating Christianity (“taking hold of the Church”). The idea is that such a process, understood in its figurative sense of taming or accommodating, but also in its literal and material sense of translating at the heart of ordinary domestic life, was at play both in the separatist, Ethiopian or Zionist, churches and in the orthodox Protestant churches, a thesis that J. Peel had already put forward in his comparative approach to the Aladura churches of Nigeria. Leaving aside the different stages of the natives’ retaking of the religious initiative, and the different types of more or less independent churches which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was the same “spectrum of imaginative possibilities” (Vol. II, p. 58) which helped forge the Tswana Christian

identity. From cultural mediators or brokers, who were the first assistant preachers sent by the missionaries to the frontline, to the prophets who founded and ran independent churches, and to the minor healing prophets (*dingaka*), we witness the same manifestation of an “indigenous agency” which combined overzealousness or imitation of the ways of the Whites with the tricks of hijacking and reclaiming the biblical message, thus giving rise to unease and ambivalence in the missionaries’ indigenisation policies. Over time, ritual “bricolage” and the domestication of the Church produced a common style of religiosity that was alternative and hybrid, legalistic and ritualistic, pragmatic and magical, messianic and therapeutic, which could be found in the multiplicity of “tribal churches” or “prayer nations”. What at first was simply a way for traditional chiefs to acquire their own churches subsequently became, in a context of rural exodus and urban proletarianisation, a powerful locus for reasserting a community’s identity. For this common cultural matrix, this new hegemony, was also the crucible in which social divisions were redistributed, since these churches fostered the formation of new Black elites.

Narrativity and agency

The importance given to the issue of “conversion” in this presentation of J. and J. Comaroff’s work should not lead to any misunderstanding since, it is clear now, the missionary enterprise of evangelisation is only a window into the whole process of converting colonial subjects to the hegemonic forms of British capitalist modernity. This position is firm and explicitly recalls Weber’s: “We have never claimed that Protestant evangelism, alone, *determined* the processes we describe” (Vol. II, p. 408). But the opposite hypothesis, the famous “thought experiment” which R. Horton invited us to conduct, in which we imagine a colonisation without missionaries and missions, leaving it to the traders, the military, the administrators, and we postulate that the colonial context would have been enough to produce subjects perfectly ripe to receive the message of the world religions or to reinvent it in their own fashion,

literally makes no sense. Colonial capitalism and commodity exchange in South Africa would not be what they are, and would not have been as efficient as they were, if the Tswana, like others, had not embraced the idea that salvation lay in bodily hygiene and wage labour, in the individual's aspiration to private property and material comfort, in short, that paradise had all the features of bourgeois domestic life.

It should be said that R. Horton is our two authors' *bête noire*, the very embodiment of dualistic thinking and a unilinear, mechanistic, rationalist, and evolutionary interpretation, whose causal and analytical blindness they constantly denounce in the name of the interdependence and even constant hybridation of the economic and the symbolic, the material and the spiritual, the political and the ethical, and, above all, the local and the global. The criticisms made by J. Peel and T. Ranger already largely prepared the ground on this subject¹⁴. However, the inclusion of the Hortonian approach to African conversion into the recurring accusations of Africanist research being made subservient to the Protestant, ethnocentric, and Eurocentric category of "conversion" is a misunderstanding or misinterpretation¹⁵. R. Horton was the first to put the term "conversion" in inverted commas, and what he describes as "African conversion" is the antithesis of any idea of radical rupture, since it suggests a process perfectly faithful to an original thought matrix (which poses another problem). It is therefore difficult to blame this Hortonian problematics for borrowing its terms and alternatives from religious ideologies of "personal" conversion, which presuppose a conscious and deliberate choice between mutually exclusive life options and thought systems, a categorical condemnation of the past, and the awareness of experiencing a profound change of identity. Even though the terms of its problematics are somewhat "intellectualist", we could even find in Hortonian thought's dialectical evolution towards a pronounced interest in – using J. Peel's phrase – the "change of Gestalt"

14 - For all references to this debate, see Mary, 1998.

15 - Vol. I, p. 249, Vol. II, p. 117.

of the subjects concerned a certain echo of J. and J. Comaroff's desire to identify the ways in which, under the guise of conversion, new forms of hegemony emerge.

Methodologically, the attention paid to "missionary narratives" (letters, diaries, testimonies) has been one of the great sources of renewal in historical anthropology in recent decades, and the Comaroffs have made extensive use of them, but the little room given to indigenous narratives (converts or pagans, ordinary people or chiefs) in this "archival ethnography" has given rise to much debate. Volume II partly corrects this impression and devotes, it is true, a chapter to pastors, catechists, and prophets, in short, to indigenous agents. Nevertheless, the question arises more generally whether the observation (meant to be empirical and not generalisable, not even to neighbouring peoples) about the singular weakness of a narrative tradition among the Tswana, or their lack of predilection for narrativity, is compatible with the asserted existence of a historical consciousness and even with the recognition of their historical agency (Peel, 1995)¹⁶. How can we, outside of any discursive form of expression, of working our way from lived memory to spoken memory, of turning past events into a story (even a plot), conceive, as J. Peel says, of the possibility of anticipating the future and influencing the course of things? The thesis constantly taken up by our authors – which stems from the tension between hegemony and ideology already mentioned – is that historical consciousness is not confined to a narrative mode of expression, in the sense of turning the past into a story using a sequential and linear sequence, that it has a wide spectrum of genres at its disposal and can be embedded in the nonverbal and implicit language

16 - Speaking more broadly of "archives" should perhaps also be qualified since most of the missionaries' or administrators' diaries that are cited (Moffat, Livingstone, Campbell, Mackenzie, etc.) are extracts from works that were published long ago, and the sources used are often drawn from more or less recent works of synthesis, which, after all, is understandable in a history that strives to advance on all fronts at once: the history of medicine, of clothing, of currency, of architecture, of law, etc. One also notes, as part of a rather broad and flexible periodisation, the common use of contemporary testimonies (collected in the field in the 1970s or even 1990s) to shed light on statements or attitudes from the last century. One thinks of the current relativisation of "biomedicine" and the recent interest in "African" medicines as a mirror of a situation that preceded the scholarly medicalisation of health problems (Vol. II, p. 363).

of the most everyday symbolic activity. The Tshidi, we are told, “spoke” primarily with their bodies and their houses, through their choice of the materials and colours of their clothing; their architectural forms or the slowness of their gestures contained implicit statements about the meaning of the social world, and even the polyethylene clothing collages of a madman, a prophet, and a visionary, who also happened to be deaf, can be read, in an exemplary fashion, as an extranarrative and nonverbal discourse that gave voice to the awareness that these dominated peoples had of the contradictions of their past and present situation¹⁷. J. and J. Comaroff naturally refrain from speaking on behalf of the Tshidi, “over their shoulders”, taking over from the missionaries, but they do claim to be able to hear some of what the Tshidi had to say through the way in which the missionaries let them speak and presented them in their writings. They are fully aware of the overinterpretative excesses that the anthropological concept of culture and its emphasis on the implicit, the hidden meaning (or on the overdetermination of the content by the form of the message) can foster, as well as of the limits of an unconscious order of categories, the key to which is meant to be provided by the structural analysis of the signifying oppositions and contrasts of the poetry and images of *sekgoa* and *setswana*. They in fact practise discourse analysis at several levels of depth, as Foucault did, going further than C. Geertz’s “thick description”, without straying into the dead ends of an “interpretative” and “textual” anthropology confined to “narratives”, and they are, more than others and at least as much as their colleague M. Sahlins, attentive to the way in which the colonial event and its indeterminacy jeopardise the cultural categories on the basis of which the interacting historical actors tried to think of it.

The third part of this great historical panorama will thus focus on schooling, and more generally on the education of the natives, over which the missionaries in South Africa, as elsewhere, had a monopoly. It

17 - Comaroff and Comaroff (1992b) where this thesis and the readings it makes possible are particularly illustrated.

is surprising that it is not until the third volume that this dimension of colonisation should be tackled head on. This choice may have something to do with the fundamental thesis that the Nonconformists' missionary enterprise gradually shifted from a triumphant ideology that relied on the immediate power of the Spirit to a strategy that was more attuned to the pedagogy and ideology of conversation. We know, however, that in most of the settlements set up by missionary congregations on African soil during the 19th century, building a school and investing in the classroom came before the church (unless these places were simply conflated), at the request not only of the colonial authorities but also of the indigenous leaders themselves. Such was the case (Vol. I, p. 233) of the agreement reached between Campbell and Chief Mothibi and the construction of the church-school by Moffat (known as *moruti*, teacher). However, in keeping with an editorial choice which refuses to follow a linear chronology and advances in a spiral on several fronts, the topic of education will undoubtedly be the key to an overview of the colonial process, and in particular of the stakes of conversion as "conversation", since the authors themselves have stated in advance that: "Schooling was the model for conversion, conversion for schooling" (Vol. II, p. 412).

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