



The Archaeology of Missions: Afterword

Robert Ross

To cite this article: Robert Ross (2018) The Archaeology of Missions: Afterword, Journal of Southern African Studies, 44:4, 743-747, DOI: [10.1080/03057070.2018.1480122](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2018.1480122)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2018.1480122>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 05 Sep 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 262



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The Archaeology of Missions: Afterword

ROBERT ROSS

(Leiden University; University of South Africa)

Historical archaeology always has to confront the question: what is to be gained from using the (generally expensive and slow) methods of archaeology to investigate those times and places for which there is considerable written evidence? These articles have discussed a number of mission stations in 19th- (and indeed 20th-) century southern Africa, which, in terms of the written material available, are among the best documented places of the region at the time. In order to answer the question, then, it seems sensible, first, to make a few comments about the problems of the written sources deriving from the missions in the places described in these articles – and more generally across southern Africa.

Missionary archives and periodicals have long been the stock-in-trade of southern African historians of the 19th century.¹ The reasons for this are evident. Missionaries were everywhere. They were often in direct contact with the rulers of African polities. They spoke African languages, initially not well, but the proficiency of most missionaries slowly increased and the children of missionaries, who often followed their parents into the church, were likely to have been bilingual. They were literate and under the obligation to communicate their experiences to the ‘home front’. And they did so in languages that western historians could read.

So far, so good. Missionaries did know, as well as any other outsiders (and better than most), how the political situation of the lands around them was organised. A number of them were first-rate ethnographers. Dr Johannes van der Kemp, Eugène Casalis, Thomas Arbousset and Henri-Alexander Junod, for instance, all describe the African societies among whom they worked with great sensitivity.² Even these, however, had their limitations. As Patrick

1 Virtually all the classic monographs on South African history in the 19th century made extensive use of mission archives, even when their prime focus was not to do with religious matters. See, for example, M.C. Legassick, *The Politics of a South African Frontier: The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana and the Missionaries, 1780–1840* (Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2010 [but written in 1969]); P. Delius, *The Land Belongs to Us: The Pedi Polity, the Boers and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Transvaal* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1983); N.J. Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003); P. Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860–1910* (London, Portsmouth and Johannesburg, James Currey, Heinemann and Witwatersrand University Press, 1994); E.A. Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom: The Pursuit of Security in Nineteenth-Century Lesotho* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993); K. Shillington, *The Colonisation of the Southern Tswana, 1870–1900* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1985); A. Kirkaldy, *Capturing the South: The Vhavenda and the Missionaries, 1870–1900* (Pretoria, Protea, 2005).

2 J.T. van der Kemp, ‘An Account of ... Caffraria’, *Transactions of the London Missionary Society*, I (1804), pp. 349–505; E. Casalis, *Les Bassoutos, ou Vingt-Trois Années d’Etudes et d’Observation au Sud de l’Afrique* (Paris, Société des Missions Evangéliques, 1859); T. Arbousset and F. Daumas, *Narrative of an Exploratory Tour to the North-East of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope* (Cape Town, Saul Solomon, 1846); T. Arbousset, *Missionary Excursion into the Blue Mountains*, edited and translated by D. Ambrose and A. Brutsch (Morija, Morija Archives, 1991); H.A. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe*, second edition (London, Macmillan, 1927). Not coincidentally, these men were among the best educated, in the formal western sense, of missionaries to southern Africa, and none of them were British.

Harries commented, ‘missionary anthropologists were unable to observe aboriginal life without suggesting ways it could be improved’.³ Others, without the systematic impulse that empowered these men, were able to hold long conversations with their congregations, in which the beginnings of a liberationist theology could emerge.⁴ Nevertheless, for many missionaries there is not any sense that they were engaged in a conversation, long or otherwise, with their potential converts, but rather that they were shouting from the sidelines and were being ignored.

In the 19th century, missionaries were almost invariably men. It is true that most were married, and within the marital relationship the wife might well be the dominant figure.⁵ The wife might also contribute significantly to her husband’s knowledge, or at least vision, of the society in which they both lived, as contacts between the missionary couple and the women around them generally ran through the missionary’s wife and her daughters, for instance in sewing classes, Sunday schools and so forth. Nevertheless, the proprieties of the 19th century and the gender ideals that the missionaries were trying to impart required that the public face, and certainly the formal reports, of the couple were, ostensibly at least, the work of the husband. Unmarried or widowed missionary women might express their opinions in public, but on (re)marriage they were required to be publicly silent.⁶

This is the moment at which missionary records become increasingly problematic. There are two ways in which this was occurring. First, there are questions about what a missionary could know of what was going on in the society in which he worked. There was always a lot going on that escaped the eyes and ears of the missionary and his family. What were sexual scandals to the missionaries occurred with some regularity, and there were probably many other incidents of which nothing is known.⁷ It was, however, always clear that missionaries were vulnerable to sexual smears. Even Robert Moffat only just survived the accusations of adultery that his Griqua enemies laid against him.⁸ Further, mission residents continued to pay *lobola*, to perform the rites of passage into adulthood and to fear witchcraft, despite the missionaries’ disapproval of the practices.⁹ There were even occasions when the missionary seems to have been intentionally challenged by the actions of those whom he was attempting to convert.¹⁰ These were examples of matters that were carefully kept out of the purview of the missionaries and thus out of their reports.

Secondly, there were matters of self-censorship. Missionaries, like everyone else, did not advertise their failures any more than necessary. They might also be wary of advertising their successes. The elaborate menu provided to Dr John Philip and his companions on a tour to the Eastern Cape at a dinner in Bethelsdorp, near Port Elizabeth, to celebrate Ordinance 50 of 1828 (which instituted unbonded labour for ‘Hottentot’ people), and the modish dress of the

3 P. Harries, ‘Anthropology’, in N. Etherington (ed.), *Missions and Empire* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 247.

4 E. Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853* (Montreal, McGill-Queens University Press, 2002); R. Ross, *These Oppressions Won’t Cease: An Anthology of the Political Thought of the Cape Khoesan, 1777–1879* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2017).

5 See, for example, Karel Schoeman’s account of the marriage between Gottlob and Rebecca Schreiner, in *Olive Schreiner: ‘n lewe in Suid-Afrika, 1855–1881* (Cape Town, Human and Rousseau, 1989).

6 N. Etherington, ‘Gender Issues in South-East African Missions, 1835–1885’, in H. Bredekamp and R. Ross (eds), *Missions and Christianity in South African History* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), pp. 135–52.

7 P. Scully, ‘Narratives of Infanticide in the Aftermath of Slave Emancipation in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony, South Africa’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 30, 1 (1996), pp. 88–105; N. Erlank, ‘Sexual Misconduct and Church Power on Scottish Mission Stations in Xhosaland, South Africa, in the 1840s’, *Gender and History*, 15, 1 (2003), pp. 69–84.

8 Legassick, *The Politics of a South African Frontier*, p. 274 ff.

9 W.G. Mills, ‘Missionaries, Xhosa Clergy and the Suppression of Traditional Customs’, in Bredekamp and Ross (eds), *Missions and Christianity*, pp. 153–72.

10 T.J. Stapleton, *Maqoma: Xhosa Resistance to Colonial Advance, 1798–1893* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1994), pp. 117–18.

inhabitants of that station, were cut out of the reports of the Huguenot missionaries to the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society when these were published in France. The prosperity of mission converts, if too demonstrative, could only harm potential fund-raising.¹¹

As a result of these sorts of considerations, missionary writings, like any other genre, whether in published form or in the archives, need to be treated with considerable caution. Often, and inadvertently, they say more about the missionaries themselves than about those among whom they worked. Mission archives are generally pleasant places to work, and the material they contain is often quite fascinating. But, as with any other set of writings, it is incumbent on the researcher to heed the danger signs that generations of scholars have put up around such collections. Moreover, these warning signs should be most frequent when the subject of a missionary's attention is the immortal soul, whether his own or someone else's. This was the ultimate goal of his labour, and something about which his own ideas of, and hopes for, salvation made him less than candid.

In some of the mission stations in southern Africa, including probably Botshabelo (but not the other places described in the articles in this part-special issue), the missionaries were able to expel those who transgressed against their rules, for instance for blatant adultery, non-marital pregnancy, drunkenness or smoking *dagga*. As there was often a secular advantage to be gained from living on a station, or, alternatively, as the consequences of dismissal could be very serious, this gave the missionaries some considerable power over their inhabitants.¹² Missionaries could thus enforce attendance at church and the adoption of a style of living that accorded with their views of correct behaviour. Elements of this included monogamy, sobriety, decent clothing, rectangular houses and well-kept house interiors. The inhabitants of stations might have restrictions placed on their display of prosperity, as indeed might the members of church congregations in the towns; the Berlin missionaries in Pretoria and what is now Limpopo province imposed sumptuary laws to prevent their converts wearing crinolines, which were confiscated by the missionary and thrown on a bonfire, or silk dresses, even to get married. These were signs of the sin of pride.¹³

This raises the question as to what was entailed in conversion. How did those who proclaimed themselves to be converted differ from their previous selves, or from those around them? At the core of this question are matters of faith. Even without entering into the various theories of salvation, which had been matters of considerable contention in Europe ever since the Reformation, it is clear that Christians had to be convinced of the existence of God, and had to accept various propositions about the influence that God had on this world, and on its human (and probably also animal) populations. The difficulty that this entailed was that it was impossible for the missionaries, or anyone else, to know if the converts really thought the thoughts which they expressed. Undoubtedly, many had had genuine religious experiences which brought them to God, or at least thought that they had.¹⁴ But, on the other hand, the statements that the church leaders required could be feigned.¹⁵ The only

11 See the account of the dinner, held in Bethelsdorp, 17 February 1830, in 'Journal du missionnaire Rolland', in *Journal des missions évangéliques*, 5 (1830), pp. 241–51, in comparison with the original, in the archives of the *Société des missions évangéliques*, Paris.

12 For *dagga* (marijuana), see *Berichte der Rheinischen Missionsgesellschaft*, 2 (1831), p. 29; *Periodical Accounts Relating to the Missions of the Church of the United Brethren*, 5 (1911), p. 212; 12 (1833), p. 461; 17 (1844), p. 327.

13 K. Ruether, 'Heated Debates over Crinolines: European Clothing on Nineteenth-century Lutheran Mission Stations in the Transvaal', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 28, 2 (2002), pp. 359–78; K. Rütter, *The Power Beyond: Mission Strategies, African Conversion and the Development of a Christian Culture in the Transvaal* (Münster, Lit Verlag, 2001), pp. 199–220.

14 See, for example, 'Traduction de la profession de foi de Marie Fortuin, rédigée et écrite hollandaise par un Griqua, diacre de l'Église de Griqua-Town', *Journal des missions évangéliques*, 1, 6 (1831), p. 317.

15 Cf. U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 6–7, where he defines semiotics as the discipline 'studying everything which can be used in order to lie'.

reasonably sure signs of conversion would be a combination of the verbal expressions of belief with the adoption of the behaviour expected of a Christian. A new convert would have to take on the 'outward and visible signs' of conversion. In other words, conversion entailed not just a change of heart and a change of mind but also a change of clothes.¹⁶

It is at this point that the historical archaeology of mission stations becomes so interesting. Archaeology as a discipline is, of course, concerned to make statements about humans in the past on the basis of the material changes they left in the landscape. These are most likely to be the reforming of the earth and the vegetation to produce field systems and so forth, the refuse people have discarded in the landscape or the remains of the dwellings in which they lived. On the basis of such material, among other things, archaeologists can attempt to describe the 'lifeways' of the people they study. Lifeways are here described as 'the combination of beliefs, customs, economies and actions that together constitute ways of doing things and thinking about doing things in the past'.¹⁷ Not all of these aspects of life can be reconstructed on the basis of the material remains that archaeologists have encountered. Hard as it always is to be certain what someone else (or indeed oneself) believes, whatever that may mean, it is much more difficult and uncertain when the evidence is totally non-verbal. The trains of inference from the physical remains that humans have left behind them to the content of their deepest thoughts are complicated and inevitably open to dispute. Probably the most successful attempts to do this in southern African derive from the study of Rock Art, but at the bottom of most analyses of southern African Rock Art are the corpus of myth and life histories and so on collected by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd from a number of /Xam prisoners in Cape Town in the 1860s, and a number of other similar collections. In the end, the text is inescapable.¹⁸

By contrast, archaeologists are generally well able to give a good account of the material circumstances of life among those they study. This can be done at two levels, at least. The first of these relates to the transformation of the landscape. The most characteristic project of a mission was the irrigation canal. To give three examples, out of many, Revd H.P. Hallbeck wrote in 1830, on Shiloh, in the valley of the Klipplaat river, about two years after the Moravian missionaries had founded the mission station there, that 'through the simple diversion of water, an itinerant nomadic people has been recreated as an agricultural one; without this step Christianity cannot take root'.¹⁹ Just to the south of Shiloh, in the Kat River Settlement, the landscape was transformed by the construction of at least 150 kilometres of irrigation channels across the valley bottoms, to turn a district in which cultivation had been sparse into a prosperous farming community.²⁰ Again, in what was to become the Northern Cape, Revd Isaac Hughes wore himself out attempting to lead out the water of the Vaal a few miles above its confluence with the Gariep, a project that proved to

16 N. Etherington, 'Outward and Visible Signs of Conversion in Nineteenth-Century KwaZulu-Natal', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 32, 4 (2002), pp. 422–39; R. Ross, *Clothing: A Global History, or the Imperialists' New Clothes* (Cambridge, Polity, 2008), pp. 83–102.

17 R. King and S. Challis, 'The "Interior World" of the Nineteenth-Century Maloti-Drakensberg Mountains', *Journal of African History*, 58, 2 (2017) p. 217.

18 J.E. Parkington, 'Interpreting Paintings Without a Commentary: Meaning and Motive, Content and Composition in the Rock Art of the Western Cape, South Africa', *Antiquity*, 63, 238 (1989), pp. 13–26; J.D. Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing: Symbolic Meanings in Southern San Rock Paintings* (London, Academic Press, 1981), and many subsequent publications. On the collection of the material, P. Skotnes, *Claim to the Country: The Archive of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd* (Johannesburg and Athens, Jacana and Ohio University Press, 2007); A. Bank, *Bushmen in a Victorian World: The Remarkable Story of the Bleek-Lloyd Collection of Bushman Folklore* (Cape Town, Double Storey, 2006).

19 *Berichten wegens de Zending der Broedergemeente*, 20 (1831), p. 25. The Klipplaat is one of the headwaters of the Black Kei.

20 R. Ross, *The Borders of Race in Colonial South Africa: The Kat River Settlement, 1829–1856* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 37–69.

be unworkable without efficient pumps.²¹ These stories could be repeated across the country.

Together with irrigation came a new way of looking at land. First, for the missionaries, brought up in a Europe with a millennium or more of private landownership, fields and field boundaries were inevitable parts of an agrarian landscape. Where they had the power to do so, they could impose their own way of partitioning the land between the various people who might have had a claim on it. Just as dams in the rivers and irrigation channels are easily to be found in those parts of South Africa where they were employed, even if, as is usual, they are no longer in working order, so it must be possible to produce convincing plans of land distribution even when the course of history has made the original divisions entirely obsolete.²²

Secondly, archaeologists are able to see how far the transformations of material culture envisaged by the missionaries actually took place, and at what tempo. Such matters include the shape of dwellings, the position of the fire, the presence of tables and chairs (though I doubt that it is possible to learn archaeologically when they came into a house), the sort of pots that were used and the provenance of such pots. For the missionaries, rectangular houses, European-style clothing covering most of the body and imported ironware and earthenware were of great importance. Missionary theory, as expounded by, for instance, Eugène Casalis, rejected the notion that ‘in order to raise the natives to his own level [a missionary] must in everything which was not reprehensible go down to theirs’. This policy had been enunciated at the beginning of the 19th century by Dr Johannes van der Kemp, but, by the time Casalis arrived (and certainly by the time he wrote his memoirs three decades later), this was considered ‘a principle of which experience has demonstrated the falsity. It was, in fact, giving up civilisation’.²³ It is this coincidence of ‘civilisation’, as defined in the 19th century, and Christianity, as expounded on the missions, that archaeology can test.

ROBERT ROSS

Professor Emeritus in African Studies, Leiden University Institute for History, Postbus 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, Netherlands. E-mail: r.j.ross@hum.leidenuniv.nl



21 Legassick, *The Politics of a South African Frontier*, pp. 285, 307.

22 This is well illustrated in the articles by King, Klatzow and Swanepoel in this part-special issue.

23 E. Casalis, *My Life in Basutoland*, translated from the French by J. Brierly (London, Religious Tract Society, 1889), p. 104.