

Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier



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In his somewhat etic analysis, Verkaaik also condemns Mohajirs for being exclusionary in their notion of culture. He criticizes them for being narrow-minded and of stereotyping others in their relations with various ethnicities. He is perturbed by the fact that educated Mohajirs do not adopt a tolerant and inclusive worldview. He implicitly draws a distinction between Mohajirs, who are portrayed as urban and modern but as lacking in tolerance and liberal political ideals, and the Sindhis, who are portrayed as nonmodern and rural but somehow more “authentic” and aesthetically closer to their rustic roots.

This neat bifurcation between urban and rural as reflecting the Mohajir-Sindhi divide pervades the argument in this book. Some of this language is present in Verkaaik’s informants’ descriptions of the social and cultural milieu, but the author exaggerates these differences in his analysis of Mohajir politics. This binarism is made explicit when the author structurally bifurcates religious practice. By arguing that Sindhis are rural and possess a shrine-based, Sufistic-derived religion while Mohajirs have a more modern and literal interpretation of religion, Verkaaik falls into the very orientalist categories that he seeks to avoid in his analysis. Caution is required while making such general claims.

Verkaaik is right to argue that the Sufi idiom of *pir* (a holy person or saint) and *murid* (a devotee or student), signifying the Mohajir leader Altaf Husein’s relationship with party workers, should be understood as a modern use of a more traditional vocabulary. He correctly suggests that the pragmatic use of the available religious idiom, along with individual charisma (a component of the political vocabulary of the subcontinent) helps Altaf Hussein’s followers define him as a *pir*. It should be emphasized, however, that because most Mohajirs did not migrate from North Indian cities, their claims to be an urban people need to be assessed in the light of the ways in which memory and history might serve present realities. Sind also has a long history of urban culture, regional trade routes, and specialized banking centers not unlike those of the towns and cities of colonial North India. Similarly, North India is itself populated with shrines of some of the most famous Sufis of the subcontinent. The invocation of the *pir* idiom should therefore not be reduced to structural dichotomies of rural-urban and modern-traditional as signifying Mohajir-Sindhi. The *pir* phenomenon may be understood not only as a tactical tool of the Mohajir leadership but also as deeply rooted in the common Muslim tradition of the subcontinent.

Methodological and theoretical problems aside, Verkaaik’s study remains an important initial attempt at studying the much neglected area of contemporary Pakistani ethnic politics.

***Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier.* JOHN L. COMAROFF and JEAN COMAROFF. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. xxiv + 588 pp., illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index.**

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In this celebration of the postmodern study of the quotidian, the Comaroffs weave a fine tapestry from the many threads that bound the South African Tswana groups into complex, multistranded relations with two 19th-century Christian missions. This portrayal of that encounter negotiates a narrow path between cultural studies approaches to colonialism, which the authors dislike because such approaches occlude the experience of real power in context, and positivist approaches to factual historical evidence and narrative.

What emerges is a masterly work on the evangelical reshaping and refiguration of the Tswana everyday world. This is the second volume of an ambitious project to document, analyze, and recast what the Comaroffs have termed the “long conversation” (p. 59) between the southern Tswana, the missionaries from the London Missionary Society, and the Wesleyan Methodists, which extended into the early decades of our century. The authors deconstruct and debunk the colonial (its emergence, its specific location in Western history, its discourses, and its hegemony) in terms of the mundane. Food and clothing, work and leisure, fashion and building styles, healing and preaching, and individual and communal rights were all sites in which the appropriations and counterappropriations of colonialism, and those of colonial evangelism and its colonization of consciousness, played themselves out. It is in and through such sites that hybridization is analyzed as it took place across the colonial divide. Beyond the towns, villages, and fields of the Tswana, the authors also explore the notion of colonialism at home and abroad, thus allowing for the simultaneous insinuation of Tswana cultural forms into the quotidian life of Europeans. Hence the Comaroffs’ magnificent cultural elucidation of the influence of colonial evangelism also depicts such richly symbolic events as the emerging fashion of Tswana patterns in Western-fabricated blankets or the pride of the missionary R. Moffat at donning an outfit composed of otherwise despised “savage materials” (pp. 248–249), including a leopard-skin hat.

Far from trivializing the colonial impact, the authors demonstrate, first of all, that profound exploration of the minutiae of colonial interaction can produce a fundamental *Verstehen* of the dominant modes of coercion, subjugation, and occasionally erasure, as these minutiae impinged upon Tswana practices and ideas. Evoking Foucault’s microphysics of power in everyday routines, the authors lay bare the inequality and imbalanced nature of hybridities. They document in great detail the consequences for the Tswana of being drawn into a money economy, of the imposition of cultivation aimed at eradicating their bovine culture, and of the incorporation of new consumptive appetites and architectural and medical styles that influenced and eventually enveloped Tswana subjectivity. Second, the Comaroffs reveal, from the perspective of empire, the correspondence that existed between this colonialism at the frontier and the internal colonial notions with respect to the “underclasses” of British society itself in a context of emerging industrial capitalism and bourgeois civil society. Interestingly, the Comaroffs leave no doubt that, as far as the African frontier

was concerned, the hybridization of British home society (the source of so much of the missionaries' practical and ideological baggage) remained limited, scarcely filtering down to the level of the mundane. The authors' sense of realism must be admired here. Their subtle analyses get to the heart of the encounter between colonial evangelism and the Tswana and decenter attention onto the internal dialectics of the empire and the Tswana polity.

At the same time, I acutely miss a sense of laughter. Colonized peoples did influence how colonizers acted upon them, and the ways in which the Tswana reacted to and resisted the reshaping of their culture and subjectivity in the colonizer's image are certainly brought to light here. Yet elements such as parody, mockery, and the world of conviviality—so obviously to be expected in a discussion of the mundanities of dressing, clothing, styling, and healing rituals, and their reciprocal refashioning across the colonial divide—are strangely absent. Humor finds no place in this humoral exploration of Tswana subjectivity. This leads irrevocably to the question of how we are to decide as to which themes qualify for the quotidian experience of colonialism. Which mundanities are absent, which are not hybridized, and why?

The authors place great emphasis throughout on the missionary project of possessive individualism. The ultimate goal of many of the missionaries' undertakings was to create discrete individuals through dress, health, hygiene, the fencing of plots, and the promotion of civil rights as a royal road to personal self-improvement and eventual salvation. Beyond the level of the communal and the relational, the missionaries frequently encountered Tswana dividualism (the opposite of individualism), its ingrained symbolism, and the forms of agency it entails. The colonial project of individualism is described here markedly in terms of its resonances in Tswana culture: its embracement by some, its impoverishment of others, and ultimately the paradoxical denial of individual rights to the Tswana subjects who were "not ready for it" (pp. 19, 398). The authors, however, neglect to examine mutual hybridization in the case of Tswana dividualism. Ignoring the effects of dividualism on the missionaries and colonialists might lead one to the dubious conclusion that modernity's project of individuality was singularly successful—an end of history.

Nonetheless, this book still holds out a promise of an emergent paradigm "after postmodernism," in which dialects, fracturedness, and oppositionality make room for the exploration of the shared vicariousness of cultural flows. Hopefully volume 3, on education, will fulfill that promise.

***Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa.* DAVID CHIDESTER. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996. xviii + 324 pp., index, bibliography, illustrations.**

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In his latest book David Chidester sets about the ambitious task of "recovering a history of the academic study of religion" (p. xii), by examining the latter's development from the perspective of one of the contested imperial frontiers: the zone of interaction between European settler and African communities in southern Africa. Influenced by such critics of Western social scientific practice as Michel Foucault and Edward Said, Chidester makes a compelling case for his position that the comparative study of religion emerged "not only out of the Enlightenment heritage, but also out of a violent history of colonial conquest and domination" (p. xiii). The fact that southern Africa was the area that endured the longest and most intense form of European settlement on the African continent contributed to the production of a larger number of detailed studies of African cultures, over a far longer period of time, than were conducted in other areas in Africa. It is within this relatively richly documented context that Chidester guides the reader into the patterns of frontier South African interpretation of African religions. He also demonstrates that these frontier interpretations influenced the development of the new field of comparative religions in Europe even while being influenced by developments in European academic centers.

Already the author of the well-regarded study *Religions of South Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) and having taught religious studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa for a considerable period of time, Chidester is well qualified to undertake this task. Comfortable with the interpretation of scholarly works on Afrikaans, Dutch, French, and German, he provides detailed descriptions of travellers', missionaries', and administrators' accounts of southern African religions. His object of study, however, is not southern African religions themselves but the history of their interpretation. Indeed, he argues that as long as a particular African community posed a military threat to European settlers, its inhabitants were regarded as people without religion. Once the frontier closed and European control was secure, these peoples were suddenly described as having religions that had to be catalogued and explained. Chidester describes two types of approaches to the examination of African religious traditions: those that entailed "genealogical" linkages to peoples described in the Bible and those that entailed morphological comparisons of the forms and functions of religious practices. Both types have had an important influence in the development of the fields of the history of religions and the anthropology of religion.

In examining the history of comparative religion, Chidester identifies three phases or epistemes in the development of South Africa's human sciences: a frontier comparative religion that grew out of the struggle for regional control; an imperial, "armchair," comparative religion in which scholars "arranged disparate evidence from all over the world into a single, uniform temporal sequence from primitive to civilized, that claimed to represent the universal history of humanity" (p. 3); and apartheid comparative religion in which scholars were "committed to identifying and reifying the many languages,