



REVIEW ARTICLE

Untangling (Missionary) Entanglements: Recent Work on Christianisation and Cross-Cultural Contact and the Case for an Entangled Approach

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Cécile Fromont, *Images on a Mission in Early Modern Kongo and Angola* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022), 336 pp. ISBN: 978-0-271-09218-8 (hardcover), \$109.95.

David Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements: Central African Pentecostalism, the Creation of Cultural Knowledge, and the Making of the Luba Katanga* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), 352 pp. ISBN: 9780299337544 (paperback). \$32.95.

Birgit Meyer, “What Is Religion in Africa? Relational Dynamics in an Entangled World,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 50:1–2 (2021), 156–81.

Abstract

This article discusses recent work on cross-cultural interactions between missionaries and Central Africans, including *Images on a Mission* by Cécile Fromont, *Religious Entanglements* by David Maxwell, and “What Is Religion in Africa?” by Birgit Meyer. These works adopt an entangled approach, examining how Christianisation engendered interconnections between Central Africans and missionaries and between Central Africa and Europe. In this way, the works paint a nuanced image of the cross-cultural interactions that occurred in the framework of the Christianisation of Central Africa, showing us how an entangled approach can help examine such interactions afresh. By contextualising the manifold ways in which Westerners and non-Westerners, the West and the non-West were entangled, we can better understand the (power) dynamics and outcomes of cross-cultural interactions. By reading sources in an entangled manner, we can get a completer view of the wide array of interactions between Westerners and non-Westerners. By acknowledging how historical entanglements shaped the analytical concepts we use, we can decolonise our scholarly practice. This article shows how the study of a fundamentally cross-cultural phenomenon—Christianity in the non-Western world—can inspire global and imperial historians to study cross-cultural interactions in a truly cross-cultural manner.

Keywords: entanglement; cross-cultural contact; Christianisation; interconnectedness; (mis)translation

Introduction

Contact across cultures altered the Eurafrican world in profound and often unexpected ways. The transfer of people, ideas, fauna and flora, and diseases between Europe and

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Africa from 1500 onwards testified to an increasing interconnectedness between the two continents. For some people, this transregional interconnectedness brought about wealth, power, and new opportunities; for others, it brought about slavery, poverty, and violence. Interconnectedness was driven by various phenomena, of which Christianisation remains one of the most debated: while some scholars argue that Christianisation amounted to cultural imperialism, others focus on how Christianity was integrated into indigenous beliefs and practices. To this often heated debate, Cécile Fromont, David Maxwell, and Birgit Meyer add nuance.

Fromont's book *Images on a Mission in Early Modern Kongo and Angola* examines how the Christianisation of the Kongo kingdom¹ during the early modern era brought Capuchin missionaries to Central Africa and enabled the Kongo to participate in the networks of the Atlantic world. Maxwell analyses interactions between the Luba in southeastern Belgian Congo² and the missionaries of the Congo Evangelistic Mission (CEM) during the nineteenth and twentieth century in *Religious Entanglements: Central African Pentecostalism, the Creation of Cultural Knowledge, and the Making of the Luba Katanga*. Meyer's article "What Is Religion in Africa? Relational Dynamics in an Entangled World" touches upon the engagements between German missionaries and the Ewe in German Togoland³ around the turn of the century. All three authors study (religious) cross-cultural contact through the lens of the intellectual endeavours missionaries undertook to further Christianisation. Fromont focuses on the richly illustrated guidebooks the Capuchins created to teach future missionaries how to interact with and convert the Kongo. Maxwell and Meyer focus on the intellectual activities in which missionaries engaged, including ethnographic and linguistic research and collecting indigenous objects and transferring them to museums, and photography.

It is not a coincidence that all three authors focus on the knowledge produced about Central Africa in the framework of the Christianisation of this region. This topic provides an ideal opportunity to challenge outdated but prevailing conceptions of (religious) cross-cultural contact. Scholars have often described interactions between missionaries and Africans as defined by suppression and resistance or, alternatively, taking the form of "friendly encounters." Yet such interactions do not produce guidebooks, translated Bibles, and photographs, the authors argue. They show how these knowledge products emerged out of complex interactions between missionaries and Central Africans and between Europe and Central Africa. These knowledge products were most certainly used by missionaries to impose Western views and buttress colonial power. The authors draw our attention to the fact that these knowledge products were also used in ways missionaries did not anticipate: Central Africans used Christian literacy and symbolism to, among other things, recast indigenous forms of identity and authority. To understand such complex interactions and their outcomes, the authors adopt an entangled approach. How they define such an approach and use it to paint a more nuanced image of religious cross-cultural contact in Central Africa is central to the first part of this review. It seeks to show global and imperial historians why entanglement is a useful framework to shed new light on the (power) dynamics and outcomes of (religious) cross-cultural contact.

The second part of this review article revolves around the challenge of how to discern the full array of entanglements between missionaries and Central Africans in sources largely produced by Europeans. How the authors take on this challenge by combining close reading, reading against the grain, and cross-cultural reading is first addressed. Then this part outlines the authors' argument that missionary entanglements shaped

¹ Present-day Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Republic of Congo/Congo-Brazzaville.

² Present-day DRC.

³ Present-day Ghana and Togo.

the concepts and frameworks we use today and that becoming aware of this can help us to decolonise our scholarly practice. This second part seeks to show global and imperial historians how an entangled approach can allow us to see sources and analytical concepts in a new light.

This review article has three goals: first, to elucidate and evaluate the works under review; second, to convince global and imperial historians that “entanglement” is a useful framework to study cross-cultural contact afresh; and third, to show how the study of Christianity in the non-Western world can teach us something about cross-cultural contact and how to study it in general—ultimately to encourage global and imperial historians to engage with work on Christianity in the non-Western world, including that of Fromont, Maxwell, and Meyer.

The Quest for a More Realistic Image of Religious Encounters

Religious cross-cultural contact in Africa continues to provoke fierce debate among scholars: while some argue that missionaries imposed Christianity onto Africans, consequently transforming indigenous beliefs and practices, others argue that Africans appropriated Christianity and incorporated it into existing beliefs and practices. Epistemic violence and one-directional appropriation certainly occurred. However, scholars who give the impression that such forms of cross-cultural interaction account for most if not all cross-cultural interactions create a distorted view—one in which a wide range of “ordinary” yet impactful interactions are left out. Moreover, scholars who prioritise and generalise certain forms of cross-cultural interaction are guilty of analytical idleness: they assume the (power) dynamics and outcomes of cross-cultural interactions, instead of proactively interrogating them.⁴

We can avoid these pitfalls, according to the reviewed authors, by using “entanglement” as a frame of analysis. This is most clearly defined by Meyer as “a hyperconnectivity in which historically constituted relations between Africa and Europe—and other regions—intersect and criss-cross each other on many levels, making it impossible to take a sharp distinction between these regions as an imagined starting point. Entanglement cannot be reduced to straightforward relations between A and B, but involves a complex, dynamic formation that scholars are to unpack.”⁵

This call is heeded by the authors in the following way: they examine how Christianisation engendered manifold connections between missionaries and Central Africans and between Europe and Central Africa and they explore how these connections modulated the (power) dynamics and outcomes of cross-cultural contact. The following section examines how such an approach allows the authors to paint a nuanced image of religious encounter, ultimately to show how an entangled approach can help us study how cross-cultural contact unfolded and impacted Central Africa afresh.

Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Reassessing the (Power) Dynamics of (Religious) Cross-Cultural Contact

The West’s (imperial) interactions with the non-Western world have traditionally been captured with sayings such as “first the missionary, then the trader, then the gunboat.”⁶

⁴ Cécile Fromont, *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 17; Cécile Fromont, “Foreign Cloth, Local Habits: Clothing, Regalia, and the Art of Conversion in the Early Modern Kingdom of Kongo,” *Anais Do Museu Paulista: História E Cultura Material* 25:2 (2017), 14.

⁵ Meyer, “Religion in Africa,” 157.

⁶ Norman Etherington, *Missions and Empire: The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1–2.

Such sayings reflect (and reinforce) the (popular) view that missionaries were proponents of cultural imperialism, “newcomers who shattered indigenous practices, worldviews, and institutions” and imposed Western ones.⁷ Such a view fits in with the broader view that Christianity in the non-Western world was a “reflex of imperialism.”⁸ Such views about missionaries and Christianity have been refuted, in particular by scholars who examine how Africans appropriated Christianity. Despite such insights, “new life was breathed into the almost lifeless corpse of the missionary-as-imperialist” in the 1990s, almost single-handedly, by anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff.⁹ As their work was widely read, the idea that Christianisation in the non-Western world amounted to cultural imperialism is often still taken as a starting point for scholarly discussion, as it is by Fromont and Maxwell.

These authors challenge various assumptions tied up with the idea that Christianisation amounted to cultural imperialism first and foremost by tracing local entanglements. They challenge the idea that missionaries had the upper hand when they interacted with Central Africans on the ground, showing how missionaries struggled because they (initially) insufficiently mastered local languages, fell ill, and lacked manpower and supplies. In such circumstances, the Capuchins and CEM missionaries were forced to collaborate with the local population to the point of dependence. The Kongo, for example, offered the Capuchins food stuff, medical care, and, above all, protection—so much so that the Capuchins realised that they “could not operate ‘without the consent of the people, and the secular arm of the Prince.’”¹⁰

Maxwell and Fromont secondly challenge the idea that Central Africans were hapless victims who passively underwent Christianisation or, alternatively, assistants in a Western enterprise of salvation and enlightenment. They show how Central Africans played key roles in conversion efforts and the intellectual endeavours missionaries undertook. Moreover, these intermediaries often controlled the parameters of cross-cultural contact. Fromont, for example, argues that *mestres*, local church leaders who intervened in preaching and hearing confessions, steered interactions with missionaries, rather than vice versa. The *mestres* could do so because of their linguistic expertise and connections with political power: “the *mestres* do not so much accompany the friars as watch over their every move” on behalf of the ruling elite.¹¹ In a similar vein, Maxwell argues that indigenous evangelists, porters, and ex-slaves were indispensable “agents of Christianity,” who “pushed the Christian frontier well beyond mission stations.”¹² All three authors show how Central Africans provided missionaries with information about indigenous beliefs and customs. Maxwell in particular highlights how such interactions were characterised by collaboration, mutual sympathy, and even friendship.¹³

Although Maxwell and Fromont reject the idea of missionary hegemony and highlight African agency, they “remain alert to issues of power.” Moreover, they steer clear of (missionary) catchphrases such as “(friendly) encounter” and “meeting.”¹⁴ Such phrases downplay the often tense and volatile nature of interactions between missionaries and Central Africans, and the fact that such interactions were often marred by conflict, misunderstanding, and mistrust. Maxwell, for example, shows how second-generation missionaries caused friction when they sought to limit the actions of pioneering Central

⁷ Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 11.

⁸ Etherington, *Missions and Empire*, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4n8.

¹⁰ Fromont, *Images on a Mission*, 143.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 155–64.

¹² Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 61, 91.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 134, 145, 147, 149, 151, 153, 161, 170, 232–3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

African evangelists in the name of orthodoxy.¹⁵ Fromont describes how the Capuchins felt uneasy about their inability to fully control how the *mestres* mediated between them and the Kongo.¹⁶

The authors strengthen their argument about a complex balance of power between missionaries and Central Africans by including supralocal entanglements into their analysis. Maxwell and Meyer both show how missionaries transferred information and objects they had acquired on the ground to scholars and museum curators in Europe.¹⁷ Fromont argues that information, objects, and visuals relating to Central Africa circulated in missionary-scholarly networks that spanned Europe, Central Africa, and Brazil.¹⁸ Through transregional connections, missionaries strengthened their activities and spread their ideas. Such connections were also instrumentalised by Central Africans. Fromont, for example, shows how the Kongo elites used the connections with the transatlantic world enabled by their conversion to strengthen their authority.¹⁹ Such individual agency, the authors remind us, should be seen within the collective experience of being incorporated into empires and transatlantic networks; an experience of which the downsides were disproportionately felt by Central Africans.

The reviewed works successfully adopt an entangled perspective to challenge views that Christianisation amounted to cultural imperialism. Doing so, they show how such an approach can inform a more balanced understanding of the (power) dynamics of cross-cultural contact: by tracing local and supralocal connections, we are compelled to see that (epistemic) violence, intimacy, (mis)understanding, and collaboration were not mutually exclusive and analyse how they existed alongside each other.

Was Africa Christianised or Was Christianity Africanised? Re-evaluating (Religious) Change

The reviewed authors not only use an entangled perspective to rethink the (power) dynamics between missionaries and Central Africans, they also use it to say something new about (religious) change; another bone of contention among scholars. While some argue that Christianity transformed indigenous beliefs and practices—Africa was Christianised—others argue that Christianity was incorporated into indigenous beliefs and practices—Christianity was Africanised. This latter perspective was particularly endorsed by anthropologists, who tend to prioritise cultural continuity over discontinuity.²⁰ Such work, however, fails to do justice to the importance Christians attach to change, according to Maxwell.²¹ He, Fromont, and Meyer show how Christianisation effectively brought about change and was associated with change, both by missionaries and Central Africans. They, however, also contextualise such (sentiments of) rupture by adopting a *longue durée* perspective, firstly regarding missionary attitudes.

The authors show how virtually every missionary who arrived in Central Africa was initially solely preoccupied with transforming indigenous practices and beliefs, often through aggressive and emphatic acts of iconoclasm. Such acts might have given an impression of rapid change, but in the long run missionaries were largely unable to realise

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁶ Fromont, *Images on a Mission*, 159–60.

¹⁷ Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 134–41; Meyer, “Religion in Africa,” 160, 172–4.

¹⁸ Fromont, *Images on a Mission*, 26, 33, 51, 82, 88, 90–1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1–7.

²⁰ Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 61; Fromont, *The Art of Conversion*, 13–15; Joel Robbins, “Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity,” *Current Anthropology* 48: 1 (2007), 5–38.

²¹ Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 61.

or control the change they envisioned, due to lacking means and resistance from Central Africans. CEM missionaries considered “backsliding” a real problem, contrary to tales of sudden and permanent conversion in propaganda. Some Luba Christians broke away from missionary churches to form or join independent churches, such as Watch Tower.²²

In response to such challenges, most missionaries settled for tolerating beliefs and practices that did not contradict Christian principles. This policy of accommodation was actively endorsed by the Vatican from the early modern period onwards. During the twentieth century, missionaries from both denominations went a step further: they tried to make Christianity more palatable for Central Africans. They did so by finding in indigenous beliefs and customs “hooks or bridges, points of compatibility” through which a “powerful resonance with the [Central African] past” could be created.²³ Such ideas were strengthened by missionaries’ experience of encroaching modernisation, which made them turn to “salvage anthropology,” devoted to “recording” what they believed to be a disappearing culture.

A similar argument about short-term disruption and long-term continuity also applies to Central Africans. Maxwell explores how social instability around the turn of the century made the Luba turn to CEM missionaries for protection and patronage. Some Luba, socially marginalised young men in particular, even used Christian literacy to challenge custom and chiefly authority and to craft new forms of individualised subjectivity beyond kinship.²⁴ These first-generation Luba converts performed iconoclastic acts to underscore their new Christian identity and differentiate themselves from their so-called less civilised, heathen counterparts.²⁵ While such acts seemed disruptive in the short term, they, according to Maxwell, fitted in with the “search for the good life”—“the pursuit of fertility, successful hunts, abundant harvests, material wealth and prosperity, [...] salvation, and protection, and life enhancement,” something deemed typical of Central African society.²⁶ Fromont, in a similar vein, argues that Kongo who mixed Central African and Christian elements were not doing something radically new, but, in fact, adhered to a Central African tradition of openness to foreign elements.²⁷

While the reviewed authors thus examine how Christianity was increasingly stitched into the fabric of Central African society, they nonetheless differentiate themselves from scholars who argue that Christianity was wholly incorporated into Central African tradition. They do so by exploring how, over the course of various local and supralocal entanglements, Central African and Christian elements were increasingly interwoven with each other, resulting in a (religious) culture that was more than the sum of its parts. Meyer and Maxwell argue that adaptation was more than just Christianity in a Central African form. Protestant missionaries believed that Central African culture could only become compatible with Christianity and thus be “improved” if it was cleansed of antisocial elements.²⁸ In a similar vein, Fromont argues that the different elements of Kongo Christian culture became mutually reinforcing to form a political culture that was distinct and cohesive.²⁹ In this way, the authors effectively highlight the “originality, exclusivity, and social significance of Christian ideas.”³⁰

²² Watch Tower was popularly known as Kitawala.

²³ Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 188, 229.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 84–7.

²⁷ Fromont, *Images on a Mission*, 181, 183.

²⁸ Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 219; Meyer, “Religion in Africa,” 161–2.

²⁹ Fromont, *Images on a Mission*, 195; Fromont, “Foreign Cloth.”

³⁰ Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 91.

The authors successfully use an entangled perspective to challenge simplifying ideas of (religious) change in Central Africa, showing how such change had a profoundly dual nature. In doing so, they reveal how an entangled approach can help us create a more nuanced view of (religious) change: by examining how old and new, Western and non-Western ideas and practices became entangled over the course of various local and supralocal entanglements, we can place continuity and change into one analytical framework.

The Entangled Method: Primary Sources and Analytical Concepts

The second part of this review article revolves around the challenge of discerning entanglements between missionaries and Central Africans in primary sources; a challenge because missionary entanglements were often not described or depicted in the usual exoticising and decontextualised manner or because they were simply not depicted or described at all. How the authors tackle this challenge through an entangled reading of primary sources is central to the first section. The second section examines the authors' argument that an entangled approach can help us to decolonise the analytical concepts we use. Meyer in particular argues that acknowledging that concepts such as religion were shaped by missionary entanglements will allow us to better counter epistemic eurocentrism in the study of European-African interactions.³¹ This section seeks to show how an entangled approach can help us to see sources and analytical frameworks afresh.

Reading Missionary Sources Cross-Culturally

Christianisation makes for a gratifying topic of historical research because the written sources produced during this endeavour are abundant and well-preserved. Nonetheless, missionary sources must be regarded with what J. D. Y. Peel calls a "hermeneutic of suspicion."³² In other words, we must be aware that missionary sources—just like any other kind of sources—never offer a faithful, one-to-one reflection of the past, but are always coloured by the motives and biases of the maker—most often European missionaries. As they sought to raise funds or legitimate and celebrate missionary work, they depicted the indigenous world as one of heathendom and backwardness and associated Christianity with light and salvation. Such biases are easy to identify, consequently making missionary sources highly suitable for analysis by classic methods, such as close reading and reading against the grain, as Maxwell and Fromont show.

Maxwell reads hagiographies of first-generation evangelists and testimonies from Luba men who had been taken to Angola to work as slaves and returned to Congo as evangelists as prime examples of missionary propaganda. He also shows that these sources, despite being geared at celebrating the efforts and religious life of evangelists and returnees, are full of detail on these men's personal life and work.³³ These sources, precisely because they were geared at celebrating the efforts and religious life of evangelists and returnees, included instances of opposition and hardship. Accordingly, they give insight into how evangelisation unfolded and was experienced. In a similar vein, Fromont shows how Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi first and foremost created the *Istorica descrizione*³⁴ for didactic

³¹ Meyer, "Religion in Africa," 156–8, 161–4, 166–72, 174–5.

³² Ibid., 16.; J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 12–14.

³³ Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 17, 144, and 161.

³⁴ Full title: *Istorica descrizione de' tre' regni Congo, Matamba et Angola situati nell' Etiopia inferiore occidentale e delle missioni apostoliche esercitateui da religiosi Capuccini*.

ends. The fact that this work also contains a self-portrait of Cavazzi reveals, according to Fromont, how the Capuchin used it to put himself in the spotlight.³⁵

Although the reviewed authors thus show that close reading and reading against the grain are valuable methods to study cross-cultural interactions, they also argue that such methods do not allow us to grasp the full range of cross-cultural interactions that occurred in the framework of evangelisation. Such methods are specifically geared at sources which depict cross-cultural interactions in a “traditional” (namely exoticising and decontextualised) manner. Non-Western people were most often depicted as heathen and primitive Others, in need of civilising and saving by superior Europeans. In addition, non-Western people, fauna, and flora were depicted in a decontextualised manner, so that European viewers could “exercise a subjectivity and epistemic control over [them].”³⁶

The Capuchin corpus, by contrast, depicts Central African people, fauna, and flora and Kongo–Capuchin interactions in close connection to the local society and landscape. Fromont convincingly shows how such “atypical” images of Central Africa were shaped by a blend of religious and didactic motives. Because these images served to inform future missionaries about how to interact with and convert Central Africans, missionaries sought to depict Central Africa in a (according to them) realistic manner. Fromont acknowledges that the Capuchins idealised what were in reality often fraught relationships. Nonetheless, she argues that such idealised depictions give insight into how missionaries envisioned cross-cultural interactions.³⁷

Missionary entanglements were not only depicted or described in “atypical” manners, they were also often not depicted or described at all. Central Africans’ contributions to missionary (scientific) efforts in particular were most often omitted from sources. This omission is put down to racism and scientific style by Maxwell. He argues that missionaries failed to acknowledge that Central Africans profoundly shaped evangelisation and knowledge production, because this meant compromising the idea that Europeans had to educate and uplift Africans. This racial bias was strengthened by a scientific one. In general, scholars excluded the names of informants and contributors to enhance scientific authority and objectivity. This practice was followed by missionaries to strengthen their scientific credentials, resulting in the erasure of the cross-cultural interactions out of which their work originated.³⁸

Entanglements which profoundly shaped missionary (scientific) activities, but which were erased in the name of the civilising mission and science thus must be actively made visible. To do so, we must rethink how we view and approach sources, according to the reviewed authors. Fromont in particular argues that we must see sources that are in name produced by Europeans as more than just representations of Western discourses about Africa that can only teach us something about Europeans practices of representation.³⁹ Instead, we must see these sources as cross-cultural products and shift our attention to their “poiesis”: the cross-cultural relationships involved in their making. To turn the “inception [of sources into] a deep domain of inquiry,” the authors creatively analyse and juxtapose various types of sources.⁴⁰

Maxwell, for example, reads photographs against ethnographic works and correspondence to gain insight into the relationships between photographer and subjects which brought forth the photographs. In this way, he shows how photography was a means

³⁵ Fromont, *Images on a Mission*, 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 130, 132, 159, 164.

³⁸ Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 143.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 231; Fromont, *Images on a Mission*, 194.

⁴⁰ Fromont, *Images on a Mission*, 194.

through which intimate relationships between CEM missionary W. F. P. Burton and local chiefs were created as well as being an iconoclastic instrument used to uncover and shame anthropophagy.⁴¹ In a similar vein, Fromont shows, through impressive art historical analysis, how Capuchin images not only depict cross-cultural interactions but also testify to the interactions which produced them. An image of a friar and a *mestre* conversing, Fromont argues, calls attention to its cross-cultural inception: the *mestre* is depicted with an arrow which points to the lines in the etching.⁴² Meyer combines archival research with analysis of museum collections to trace the physical displacement undergone by legba-figures (“fetishes”) and dzokawo (“charms”)—from original indigenous context to the hands of missionaries, scientists, and collectors, and finally, to museums—and how this trajectory went together with semantic (mis)translation—from spiritual object, to art, to signifier of the past.⁴³

The authors strengthen such a creative analysis by showing how the cross-cultural character of missionary sources was modulated by their religious objectives. Fromont, for example, shows how the Capuchins’ didactic ambitions compelled them to an ingenious attempt at cross-cultural communication. They sought to inform future missionaries about practices that were rooted in Central African ideas about materiality and religion, ideas which ran counter to European ones. To depict (what they believed to be) Central African ideas to a European audience, the Capuchins used European strategies of visual representation in original ways. They, for example, depicted idolatry by depicting a live goat on a pedestal, consequently altering the well-known Christian imagery of the golden calf to show that Central Africans (wrongly, according to missionaries) worshipped animals and objects as if they were God.⁴⁴ Likewise, Maxwell shows how CEM missionaries tapped into scientific ideas of disenchantment to turn photography into an effective iconoclastic instrument.⁴⁵

In short, the reviewed authors show us that if we want to foreground (religious) cross-cultural interactions, we must analyse sources in a creative manner. We must consider them cross-cultural products shaped by cross-cultural interactions, even if these interactions are not immediately visible. Making these interactions visible will first and foremost allow us to paint a more complete image of the cross-cultural interactions that occurred in the framework of Christianisation. It will also allow us to tackle epistemic eurocentrism in our scholarly practice.

Entanglement as a Means to Decolonise Scholarly Knowledge Production

Tackling epistemic eurocentrism in scholarly knowledge production has been high on the agenda of various academic disciplines and fields over the past decade. One way to decentre Western frameworks is to spotlight global interconnectivity.⁴⁶ The disruptive potential of such an approach has recently been called into question by various scholars. Their criticisms represent a broader hesitance about how to move forward with decolonising scholarly knowledge production. An entangled approach can offer relief, Meyer argues. In doing so, she builds on the work of scholars of world Christianity and African intellectual history.

⁴¹ Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 142–78.

⁴² Fromont, *Images on a Mission*, 165–86.

⁴³ Meyer, “Religion in Africa,” 172–4.

⁴⁴ Fromont, *Images on a Mission*, 107–28.

⁴⁵ Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 125–6.

⁴⁶ See, Call for Papers for the Worlds Apart? Futures of Global History Conference, Vienna, May 2023, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/73374/announcements/10739321/worlds-apart-futures-global-history>.

Scholars of world Christianity, including Andrew Walls, have argued that how we study Christianity must reflect the reality that Christianity no longer is a Western religion (if it ever was), but a global religion, one that was (and still is) formed by engagement with non-Western religions, societies, and cultures. To achieve this, we must, according to Walls, rethink geographical and chronological biases in syllabi and the importance we attach to events such as the Reformation.⁴⁷ In a similar vein, Meyer calls out the tendency to relegate religion in Africa to area studies as this wrongly suggests that “religion in Africa is [. . .] simply about or confined to Africa.”⁴⁸ She argues that we should give religion in Africa a central place in the discipline of religious studies, accordingly heeding Stuart Hall’s call to “rewrite the margins into the centre, the outside into the inside.”⁴⁹ Doing so will not only allow us to better reflect a reality of entanglement, she argues, it will also allow us to understand how our own scholarly practice is shaped by historical entanglements in Central Africa.

Meyer’s argument echoes work from scholars, such as philosopher Valentin Yves Mudimbe, who have explored how disciplines involved in producing knowledge about Africa—and by extension Europe—were shaped by epistemic entanglement. Mudimbe has namely examined how African (and not coincidentally often Christian) intellectuals used European frameworks to better understand African realities. He enquires into the political outcomes of such epistemic entanglements: were African intellectuals who deployed the Western intellectual legacy for African intellectual self-determination truly liberated or did they merely “speak back to their colonial masters?”⁵⁰ Although Mudimbe does not explicitly answer this question, he nonetheless shows that entanglement is a double-edged sword: it can be used to strengthen eurocentrism as well as to unsettle prevailing frameworks.

To this history of entangled knowledge production, the reviewed authors add the epistemic entanglements which occurred in the framework of Christianisation. They show how missionaries shaped ideas about “right” religious objects through comparison with “wrong” ones, such as idols. Meyer shows that even when missionaries believed they were including Ewe spirituality into universal Christianity, they nonetheless studied it through the lens of Western notions of religion. Through such a translation exercise, missionaries misrepresented and discredited indigenous conceptions of spirituality—including the notion that religion/spirituality is something worldly, a part of daily life and a means to enhance it.⁵¹ Through missionary translations and comparisons, indigenous ideas and views were thus marginalised, while Western ones were confirmed and spread.

All three authors examine how such “mistranslations” had an impact beyond the mission field and consequently shaped (contemporary) scholarly practice. Meyer shows how missionary conceptions of Ewe religion informed museum collections as these are filled with objects missionaries collected and inscribed with new meanings.⁵² Maxwell argues that anthropology was shaped by missionary science because scholars in European centres of learning used data collected by missionaries and accepted images and objects collected and made by them.⁵³ Eurocentric ideas about Central Africa were not only

⁴⁷ Andrew Walls, “Eusebius Tries Again: Reconceiving the Study of Christian History,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24:3 (2000), 105–11.

⁴⁸ Meyer, “Religion in Africa,” 159.

⁴⁹ Stuart Hall, “Un-settling ‘the Heritage,’ Re-imagining the Post-Nation: Whose Heritage?,” *Third Text* 13:49 (1999), 11.

⁵⁰ Pierre-Philippe Fraiture and Daniel Orrels, eds., *The Mudimbe Reader* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 51.

⁵¹ Meyer, “Religion in Africa,” 161–4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 172–4.

⁵³ Maxwell, *Religious Entanglements*, 134–41.

strengthened by transregional entanglements, but also by the absence thereof. Fromont, for example, shows that the Capuchin corpus was not only frowned upon by superiors, but also attracted few readers due to its counterintuitive way of depicting Central Africa. Consequently, it never had the opportunity to unsettle existing interpretations of Africa.⁵⁴

The fact that disciplines such as anthropology were shaped by missionary entanglements is not widely known: as missionary entanglements were erased out of the sources, they were also erased out of the history of these disciplines. Writing those entanglements back into this history is one way in which we can contribute to scholarly decolonisation. The other way taps into the disruptive potential of entanglement. Translation, according to Meyer, can mean more than “[submitting] foreign terms to Western ones, thereby smoothing out differences [. . .]. [It can also imply engaging] with differences.”⁵⁵ Such a “productive” translation exercise—compared to the “reductive” ones missionaries undertook—can help us to provincialise our own frameworks, as Meyer shows regarding the concept of religion. She notices that the missionary endeavour and Pentecostal Churches—generally seen as Western forms of religion—have a strong worldly focus—a characteristic generally associated with African religion. Consequently, she concludes that a worldly orientation can and should be part of how we define religion in general.⁵⁶ Last but not least, Meyer argues that such epistemic entanglements can only truly be productive if they are rooted in real entanglements, namely collaborations between European and Central African scholars—accordingly completing the circle.⁵⁷

In short, the authors show that spotlighting global interconnectivity remains a valid way to tackle epistemic eurocentrism in scholarly knowledge production. We can decolonise our own scholarly practice by making it better reflect a reality of global entanglements. We can also acknowledge how our scholarly practice was informed by mistranslation and explore how it can be further unsettled by new translations.

Conclusion

The reviewed authors successfully create a nuanced understanding of (religious) cross-cultural interaction in Central Africa through an entangled approach. They show that while cross-cultural interactions were engendered by Christianity, they were fundamentally facilitated by Central Africans’ openness to external influences. The authors foreground a wide range of cross-cultural interactions and their complex impact by reading sources in an entangled manner and by weaving entanglements back into their own scholarly practice. In this way, they show how an entangled approach can help us to study cross-cultural interactions afresh. Accordingly, the authors not only build on existing scholarship on (religious) cross-cultural contact, but also make a significant contribution to this scholarship. This contribution could have been better highlighted by the authors by more explicitly embedding their work in the existing scholarship.

It is no coincidence that the most innovative work on cross-cultural contact is currently being written by scholars of Christianity in the non-Western world. Christianity is namely a prime example of a fundamentally cross-cultural phenomenon: it only gained broad appeal when it was detached from its Western origins and grounded in local society—a shift enabled by local and supralocal, real and epistemic entanglements. Consequently, the study of Christianity in the non-Western world can give us insight into various key aspects of cross-cultural interactions in general and how to study them.

⁵⁴ Fromont, *Images on a Mission*, 5.

⁵⁵ Meyer, “Religion in Africa,” 162.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 166–72.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

The study of Christianity in the non-Western world firstly reveals that Christianisation was a key and complex driver of interconnectivity between Europeans and Central Africans and between Europe and Central Africa; an interconnectivity which both reflected and contributed to the globalising (early) modern world. To understand this world and some of its key features—including new forms of identity and transregional knowledge—we must pay attention to Christianity. The study of Christianity in the non-Western world secondly teaches us that we cannot reduce cross-cultural interactions to a particular form or make assumptions about the motives which underpinned them and the outcomes which they produced. We can only understand them by examining how they manifested themselves in different circumstances at different times through contextualisation. While the merit of such an approach might seem obvious to historians, we must confirm it in the face of persistent simplifying meta-narratives.

Thirdly, the study of Christianity in the non-Western world teaches us that only a fraction of the cross-cultural interactions that occurred in the (early) modern world were depicted and described in the sources. Knowing why particular interactions were erased and making them visible through creative source analysis is a key responsibility of scholars of entanglement. Fourthly, the study of Christianity in the non-Western world brings into focus how disciplines involved in producing knowledge about Africa were shaped by entanglements. Reflection on how such entanglements shape our own scholarly practice is another key responsibility of scholars of cross-cultural interaction. Fifthly, the study of Christianity in the non-Western world teaches us that the idea that cross-cultural contact was something special, so much so that its consequences had to be controlled, is a very Western one. From a Central African perspective, engaging with other cultures was an ordinary activity. While openness to external influences is a defining feature of Central African society, we could, through a “productive translation,” consider such openness as a vital aspect of encounters *tout court*.

The study of Christianity in the non-Western world thus confirms that cross-cultural interactions were one of the biggest drivers of sociocultural change in the (early) modern world. This study also reminds us that we can only really grasp this if we question pre-conceived, often Western, notions about cross-cultural interactions and how they are described and depicted (or not). In this way, the study of Christianity in the non-Western world urges us to analyse cross-cultural interactions in a truly cross-cultural fashion. Consequently, engaging with the work of scholars of Christianity in the non-Western world—and that of Maxwell, Fromont, and Meyer to begin with—is vital for any imperial or global historian.

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