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Enslaving Definitions

A REVIEW

Henk J. van Rinsum, *Slaves of Definition: In Quest of the Unbeliever and the Ignoramus*. Maastricht (The Netherlands): Shaker Publications, 2001, 189 pp., ISBN 90-423-0153-8 (= Ph.D thesis, Utrecht University, May 17, 2001).

The main subject of this PhD dissertation is the critical examination of the history of the study of the indigenous religions of Africa by European scholars, missionary and anthropological. As such, it is a stimulating exercise in ‘reflexivity’ for methodological purposes. ‘Reflexivity’ is ‘bending back upon oneself’, either on the history of one’s discipline, or on the contributions an author is making to it himself, or herself, for the purpose of uncovering the mechanisms, which cause it to serve other purposes than scholarship’s manifest aim: the production of disinterested knowledge. These mechanisms typically originate in the research contexts, political, colonial and/or post-colonial, religious, institutional, and other, by which both the researcher and his, or her, research are constrained and shaped. As such, these mechanisms operate mostly without the scholar being aware of them, for the ‘ulterior motives’ of these mechanisms are usually well hidden beneath a scholar’s honest quest for objectivity. The reflexivity by which they are uncovered is, therefore, often both a guilt-ridden analysis of a disciplinary tradition in scholarship, demythologising its past ‘achievements’, and a soul-searching exercise in methodological purism on the part of the ‘reflexive’ scholar. He, or she, anxiously examines to what ulterior purposes and interests his or her own attempts at dispassionate research are deflected by some of the contextual constraints on one’s academic work.

Both the critical examination of the past of the study of the religions of Africa by European scholars, and doubts in respect of the validity of one’s efforts, are apparent in this thesis. Its author served for many years in the administration of Utrecht University as a staff officer for international relations, in particular with universities in Southern Africa. The structure of his thesis is a bit odd, because the author availed himself of the option that articles, published in refereed journals or accepted for publication, may be compiled into a PhD thesis, if they display

sufficient coherence in terms of content and disciplinary approach. This dissertation is certainly coherent in terms of disciplinary approach. In terms of subject matter, however, it may seem somewhat disparate, for the author examines two fields, which, at first sight, seem completely unrelated, in the four articles that form the body of this thesis. One is the history of the study of the indigenous religions of Africa; and the other is Van Rinsum's own field of professional work: 'development co-operation' between the universities of 'the North' and universities in Africa.

The history of the study of the indigenous religions of Africa is critically examined in three articles (25-117) with the help of two concepts: Okot p'Bitek's 'slaves of definition', and Edward Said's 'Orientalism'. By 'slaves of definition', p'Bitek referred to scholars of the indigenous religions of Africa, who perceived the indigenous religions of Africa after the Western-Christian, monotheist definition of religion, which is replete with Greek metaphysical thought (96-99). 'Being slaves of their definition', they failed to represent the indigenous religions of Africa as they were in and by themselves (96, 172). These scholars were of four kinds: European missionaries and anthropologists (like Smith and Evans-Pritchard), and African nationalists and theologians (like Kenyatta and Mbiti). They had all in common that they were addicted to finding a 'Supreme God' in African religions after the Christian monotheist paradigm (e.g. 29-32, 34-36), to the extent that they constructed one where none was to be found. They did so by 'Hellenising' these religions, that is by smuggling Greek metaphysical concepts into them.

In addition to enslaving these 'definers' at the cognitive level and distorting their perceptions and representations of the indigenous religions of Africa, the Western Christian definition of religion, however, also served at the political level as an instrument for subjecting and enslaving other peoples, societies, cultures and religions (172-173). It did so by imposing an identity of inferiority upon them. This political function, which is well hidden beneath a scholar's honest search for objective representation, Van Rinsum analyses with the help of Said's concept of 'Orientalism'. Its crux is that the 'Orientalist' study of Islam by European scholars was permeated with a 'style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident', by which the latter 'dominated, restructured and maintained authority over' the former (90). Said regards 'Orientalism' as 'part of a colonial discourse that aimed to master the "Other" through a process of knowing the "Other"' (3). The 'Hellenisation' of the indigenous religions of Africa, uncovered by p'Bitek, served the same purpose, says Van Rinsum, as did that other 'colonial science', ethnography (8-10). All three 'domesticated' the 'Other' by prescriptively imposing a Western dichotomous epistemological order upon him. That is, the 'Other' was 'enslaved' by the hegemonic assignment of an inferior identity to him by means of one of several dichotomies depicting the European as superior and African as inferior. Examples

are the pairs that assume that the European is ‘civilised’, ‘true believer’, ‘rational’, ‘scientific’, ‘progressive’, modern’, or ‘developed’, and denigrate the African as ‘savage’, ‘unbeliever’, ‘irrational’, ‘lacking science’, ‘backward’, ‘primitive’, ‘tribal’, ‘traditional’, and ‘undeveloped’ (e.g. 173-174).

To substantiate this argument, Van Rinsum devotes first two articles (chapters 2 and 3) to Edwin Smith (1876-1957), pioneer in the study of the indigenous religions of Africa through the classic *The Ila-speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia* (1920, which Smith co-authored with Andrew Dale) and Smith’s many other publications. In addition, Smith was ‘one of the founding fathers of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures’, ‘a member of the Council of the Royal Anthropological Institute’ since 1927, its President in 1934-1935, and editor of *Africa* from 1945 to 1948. In brief, he was a pivotal figure in both the missionary and colonial study of the indigenous religions of Africa. Smith invented the concept ‘African religion’, which, in its turn, inspired Parrinder to invent ‘African Traditional Religion’, or ATR, which concept gained a hegemonic position in African universities through Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu, serving well both their Christian and Pan-African ideologies (25-26, 171-172). Van Rinsum suggests that both concepts defined the ‘Other’ – i.e., the faithful of the indigenous religions of Africa – as ‘unbeliever’, or at least as an inferior kind of believer – of the *praeparatio evangelica*, or ‘kindergarten’ kind (8-11, 32, 171-172) – relative to (Western) Christianity as – if not the true, then at least – the superior religion. As the Orientalists conceptually subjected Islam, liberal Anglophone Christian missionaries, anthropologists, nationalists, and theologians cognitively enslaved African believers by their theology of fulfilment in the interests of the spread in Africa of Western Christianity and European colonial rule and post-colonial supremacy by imposing this identity of inferiority upon Africans.

Van Rinsum reinforces his Said-ian analysis of the history of the study of ‘ATR’ by devoting his third article (chapter 4, 89-117) to Okot p’Bitek (1931-1982), the pioneer critic of the ATR-paradigm in the study of the indigenous religions of Africa and himself an a-theist (120, n.3). In his *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1971) and articles, p’Bitek conducted a fierce polemic against the ‘Hellenisation’, i.e. Christianisation, of the indigenous religions of Africa by John S. Mbiti and Evans-Pritchard. Together with Idowu and other African Christian theologians, Mbiti established ATR as a construct serving Western-Christian religious (and Pan-African) interests. Van Rinsum quotes p’Bitek as demanding: ‘Wipe the blackboard clean, so that we may draw a true and vivid picture of African deities, rituals and beliefs’ (140). It must be wiped clean, he comments, for two reasons. Not only must the distorted descriptions of Africa’s indigenous religions be rectified, but their believers must also be freed from the denigrating identities imposed on them for the sake of well-hidden imperialist strategies, religious, cultural, political, economical, and other.

By means of these two foci – on the fountain-head of the ATR-tradition, Edwin Smith, and its major African critic, Okot p'Bitek –, Van Rinsum's thesis breaks new ground in the critical analysis of the history of Western-Christian modes, theological and anthropological, in the study of the indigenous religions of Africa.

In chapter 5 (119-167), Van Rinsum switches to a critical examination, along Said-ian lines, of his own work as a member of staff of Utrecht University. He begins by pointing to the 'double tract of the Christianisation and Academisation of Africa' as the two sides of one coin. The liberal Christian view of ATR as *praeparatio evangelica* is paralleled by the *praeparatio epistemica*, that other, secular gospel of unilinear fulfilment which assumes that the local systems of knowledge of Africa must be superseded by the formal education of Europe. Both are varieties of the 'development' ideology. It says that Africa is forever, and in all fields, in need of catching up with Europe (11, 173). Van Rinsum quotes Mazrui on African universities as the 'cultural seminaries' producing 'the high priests of Western civilization in the continent' (119). The dichotomy 'developed' *versus* 'not (yet) developed' governed virtually all donor-recipient relations between the universities of the rich nations of the West and those of poor nations of Africa in postcolonial times. It allowed the West to establish its historically contingent concept of 'the university' into a hegemonic institution with universal claims and ambitions by prescriptively imposing the identity of the *ignoramus*, i.e. of academic inferiority, on African (and other) academics (123). More importantly, it also marginalised the local knowledge systems of Africa (128). They were seen as having served at most as a *praeparatio epistemica* to the formal education of the West and its apex, the university (11-13). 'Universities were established [in Africa in late colonial time] as extensions of their European counterparts and served as such as extensions of the [metropolitan] epistemological order, to which other systems of knowledge were expected to comply' (130). In this period, 'an imperial framework of control was imposed' (134) upon the new universities (130-136). After the 1970s, emphasis shifted towards creating 'African universities', but metropolitan control was subtly strengthened by the demand of, e.g., the World Bank, that 'African universities' serve as 'development universities' and foster the social transformation and economic modernisation of African societies (137-138, 147-152).

This (post)colonial discourse was criticised by a number of African authors, such as Okot p'Bitek, Ali Mazrui, Paul Houtonji and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, as alienating, 'culturally castrating', and creating a dependence syndrome in African academics at both the cognitive and institutional levels. Just as Europe maintained its economic mastery over Africa by extracting raw materials from it and re-importing them into Africa as finished products, so it kept it in academic subjugation by importing data on Africa, processing them into scientific theories in the metropolitan universities, and exporting them back to the universities of

Africa to be taught there. These processes of ‘extroversion’ (of data about Africa) and ‘introversion’ (of European theories about Africa) were aggravated by the South-to-North brain drain and the systematic marginalisation of African academics in academic publishing.

These authors insist that African academics free themselves from the mental chains of the Western academic discourse. Their colonised minds must be decolonised by ‘thinking back’ (138-146). In the past century, Africans successfully resisted European religious supremacy through the AICs (African Independent Churches) and the Pentecostalisation of the mission churches (152-154, 173). Africa should not only ‘believe back’, say these authors, but also ‘think back’, as feminist scholars did in metropolitan universities in the face of male domination in scholarship (156-158). African universities should be transformed into AIUs, ‘African Independent Universities’. They should become ‘Transversities’, ‘able to accommodate different modalities of knowledge and different epistemologies’ (154).

The soul-searching part, on the ethics of his own involvement, as an administrator and academic, in the co-operation between Utrecht University and universities in Southern Africa, is found in the *Post scriptum* to this chapter (159-161) and in the concluding chapter 6 (171-176). Van Rinsum demands that metropolitan universities desist from using ‘development’ as a ruse for imposing the Western epistemological discourse on African universities. The AICs developed in isolation from the ‘mission churches’. He suggests that there may be a similar need for ‘a certain degree of disengagement’ between African and Western universities. Whatever intercourse remains, should be qualified by African intellectuals domesticating modernity in their own ways, intensifying their links with universities outside the West, and ‘counter-penetrating’ the Western universities, e.g. by targeting Black Americans (159).

These are courageous suggestions, but Van Rinsum is aware that they are unrealistic. He notes ‘the intriguing paradox’, that the fundamental criticism of Western intellectual domination of Africa by p’Bitek, Mazrui and others is ‘couched in the Western conceptual framework that they internalised during their intellectual formation in the West, and directed at a Western audience’ (160; also 105-112, 172). In addition, these critics were usually holding posts in Western universities, were part of the brain drain, and had access to academic publishing. So, on the one hand, Western academic discourse was generating its own African critics. But on the other hand, their ‘decolonising-the-mind’ movement ‘seemed nothing less than a reinforcement of the Western discourse’ (145). In addition, Van Rinsum fears that universities in Africa may yet be further marginalised in the near future by the market-approach to higher education some Western universities have recently been developing. They are rapidly building satellite campuses in Africa for the purpose

of aggressively commoditising knowledge through a system of overseas validated courses (160-161).

Van Rinsum concludes by admitting that he ‘was sometimes confused by the paradoxes [he] came across’ in his analyses of Europe’s religious and intellectual domination of Africa. He also confesses that he undertook this study not in order ‘to find definitive answers, but rather to raise valid and relevant questions’, that these questions ‘flow endlessly’ (171), and that he is ‘not able to offer definitive answers’ (173). Particularly his analysis of the relationships of Western universities with African universities ‘bears the mark of the writer’s paradoxes’. On the one hand, he regards rationality a (secular) blessing for modern people. On the other hand, however, he has come to view academic ‘development co-operation [...] more and more in terms of a secular mission bringing the “gospel” of the “developed” to the “underdeveloped”, thereby severely downplaying the importance of the locality of the “underdeveloped”’ (173).

So, the heart of this book is the polemical Said-ian analysis of the current European power to define Africa by means of numerous denigrating dichotomies, and thereby to continue Europe’s control over Africa. p’Bitek’s analysis of Western and African scholars as ‘slaves of their definitions’, by which they distort the indigenous religions of Africa, is valid in itself at the cognitive level, but is shown to serve primarily as yet another mechanism, at the political level, to control Africa through dichotomous definition.

One criticism, therefore, which may be levelled against this stimulating book is that its main title should have been ‘Enslaving by Definition’, or ‘Enslaving Definitions’, instead of ‘Slaves of Definition’. Another may be directed at its subtitle, ‘In Quest of the Unbeliever and the Ignoramus’. As a polemical strategy, Said-ian analysis needs to postulate that Europeans subjected Africans by means of dichotomous definitions of an absolute kind, in this case by defining Africans as ‘unbelievers’ and ‘ignoramus’ and Europeans as ‘true believers’ and as ‘enlightened by rational thought and science’. So, Van Rinsum is at pains to argue that Smith, ‘given his own framework of reference, could only have concluded [...] that “other” meant *un*-believing and *un*-knowing’, and must, therefore, have regarded the Ba-Ila as ignorant savages and unbelievers at the outset of his missionary career (9). Only gradually, through a process of ‘dialogical dynamics’ (9) and by living among them, would Smith have come to regard them as having a religion and as believers, be it of the kindergarten kind (173). However, the biographical data about Smith (27-29) which Van Rinsum supplies, as well as Smith’s definition of ‘religion’ as ‘a sense of dependence upon supersensible powers who are able and willing to help’ (31), strongly suggest otherwise. Smith did not study theology. He already espoused a liberal, inclusive theology of religions before his arrival among the Ba-Ila. Consequently, he never regarded them as ignorant savages and unbelievers.

Van Rinsum's unsubstantiated argument seems to me to prove that he himself too became a 'slave of his definition' at this point. It also goes to reinforce the point, forcefully made by Okot p'Bitek, that all theories, European and other, necessarily are very selective in their analysis and explanation of the complex African data. This in particular true of the dichotomous theory of Said espoused by Van Rinsum. Though it sheds light on particular aspects of them, it must ignore the rest, and thereby distorts them to a greater or smaller degree. This criticism should not, however, detract from the merits of this book as an eye-opener, which needs to be read and discussed critically by scholars of the religions of Africa.