

On a mission from God

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**CIVILISING BARBARIANS:
MISSIONARY NARRATIVE AND
AFRICAN TEXTUAL RESPONSE
IN 19TH-CENTURY SOUTH
AFRICA** by Leon de Kock
(Lovedale Press/University of the
Witwatersrand Press.)

One of the ongoing debates in South African historiography is the role of Christian missionaries in the 19th century. Were they just agents of imperialism? Or were they subversive elements in the colonial state? Or was it all more complex – were they, perhaps, witting or unwitting agents of subversion of colonial authority? It is now broadly agreed that missionaries in the Cape colony and beyond were deeply committed to the three Cs: Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation. But what was the impact of these three Cs on the African population?

Leon de Kock, a senior lecturer in English at the University of South Africa, has tried to bring together revisionist history and post-modernist literary theory to answer some of these questions. He focuses attention, geographically, on the Eastern Cape; and on the various forms of missionary discourses and the responses of African authors. As such, his approach must inevitably be highly selective.

Missionaries were the first to take African education seriously in colonial South Africa. Like all education, it was far from value-free and the values it sought to inculcate were the three Cs mentioned above. All were inter-linked with education, though even the missionaries

themselves were divided on the issue of education's purpose. For example, the Reverend William Govan seems to have held a view of education for equality between the educated blacks and whites; whereas, Reverend Dr James Stewart believed that education would "civilise" Africans but would not lead to equality.

African responses to the dominant missionary discourse were almost as varied. Some Africans clearly internalised the heavily Manichean Christian education that was served up to them. This manicheanism (radical dualism of opposites) was rooted, it seems, in a view that forever placed Europeans and Africans at opposite ends of a value-spectrum.

Africans such as like John Tengo Jabavu and Elijah Makiwane grew through their education to adopt a position, in journalism and public life, that – although often couched in the discourse of the missionary – stretched its content to the limits. Adopting the various colonial discourses, particularly the values of Christianity, civilisation and the glories of empire, they challenged the empire to live up to its claims in a discourse that De Kock calls "subversive subservience", often to the horror and disapproval of their missionary mentors.

As he points out, "the master narrative of 'civilisation' with its teleology of ultimate fairness and equal justice in a British constitutional system was used strategically, rhetorically, and tactically in the process of a very material and political struggle".

Missionaries and indigenous clergy also get an examination from De Kock in the latter part of the book. Here he examines representations of four characters: Robert Moffat, David Livingstone, Tiyo Soga and

Ntsikana. Sometimes, as in the Moffat story – where Moffat’s self-perception is one of a semi-tragic romantic hero battling against the odds for God and country – there seems to be a surprising aspect of missionary discourse, one which sustains, legitimates and validates self-delusions in circumstances of otherwise-unbearable extreme adversity.

For Livingstone, however, the discourse embodies the complementary ideals of scientific research into “unknown” Africa, Christian evangelism and promoting commerce. The narrative persona of Livingstone combines the Renaissance humanist and Christian missionary. De Kock uses Livingstone’s “discovery” of Mosioatunya/Victoria Falls to illustrate the point that often in the history of colonisation “physical colonisation followed textual incorporation”.

More complex, and more interesting, is the fate of Tiyo Soga. An analysis of Soga’s biography (hagiography) by John A Chalmers shows him represented as an African who “saw the light” (to use a more modern phrase), turned his back on the “wicked paganism and superstition” of his people, became a Christian and a minister, and as a result a hero for the missionaries.

The extent of his acceptance might be seen in the (to my mind ironic) last words of Chalmers’ account: “A Model Kaffir.” In reality, however, Soga was perhaps more complex, a point De Kock manages to extrapolate from other sources, Soga’s own words. Soga was more ambivalent about the “wonders” of European civilisation, colonial Christianity and renunciation of African tradition than the “official story” seems to tell us.

The importance of *Civilising Barbarians* lies partly in this undermining and ex-posing of the dominant and subversively subordinate narratives. It is

also, it seems to me, a plea to look at history and at language in a more critical light. De Kock wants to reclaim history as narrative, “telling itself to itself”, and point to the use of English as a language of colonial domination. It is strong stuff and not everyone will like what he’s done.

Many historians may find De Kock’s methodology thoroughly strange, even alienating. Post-modernism is a philosophical system that is very diverse, riddled with often brain-wrenching jargon, and is itself a theoretical battleground. Many historians, like many schooled in analytical philosophy, may simply reject the discourse in its entirety as utter nonsense, obscure or irrelevant.

This, I think, may be shortsighted. Books like this one demonstrate that a certain insight can be gained from such a method; difficult, even unpleasant, though it may be for some to master post-modernism (which is after all at its core a form of radical scepticism which seems to relativise the historian’s project), it may – like Marxism has done – bring us to new insights about the past, which means ultimately insights about ourselves.