WORDS WITH A CERTAIN FIXED VALUE:
The concepts of primitive and Islam in the colonial literature about West Africa

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> '....they have among us a certain fixed value - a conventional value, but a useful one.' Mary Kingsley (1897, p. 429)

Introduction

Some fifteen years ago I was engaged in studying the idea of 'kennis van den Inlander' (knowledge of the Native) in the writings of civil servants who worked in the Dutch East Indies in the early nineteenth century. As this knowledge at that time must have been extremely limited and based on no more than a pragmatic acquaintance with the people, I wondered how these officials and their opponents, the plantation owners, could use this notion as a decisive argument in their political discussions. In the footsteps of Van Vollenhoven I tried to assess the content of that 'knowledge' and to separate image and illusion from empirical substance, concentrating on anachronisms in post-colonial interpretations of those early ethnographic sources.[1]

[1] Here I refrain from further reflection on the notion of 'knowledge' (see e.g. Von Laue, 1975 and Mudimbe, 1988, p. 64 sqq). I only want to distinguish in a rough way ethnography from pragmatic knowledge pretending to be founded on ethnographic ('scientific'/experiential) knowledge. Although my most direct sources of inspiration here are the works of Johannes Fabian, I must also acknowledge my debt to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Especially notions of 'knowledge' of the Other as discussed by him and the ways this 'knowledge' resulted in incorporation, assimilation and appropriation of the Other (e.g. Said, 1978, pp. 31-49, pp. 210-222).

Notwithstanding my conclusion that much of the unreliability and lack of validity which modern ethnologists attributed to those sources resulted from their own poor interpretations, I nevertheless was deeply impressed by the fact that a handful of men could 'govern' millions of Indonesians on the basis of a knowledge of land and people that proved nearly completely illusory. However, by concentrating on the illusory character of this knowledge, I missed an important point. In this way I unwittingly accepted the pretensions of this colonial 'knowledge'. After all, demonstrating the weakness or even the illusory character of this knowledge of the Native did not imply an essential criticism of the idea that the knowledge *was* a representation - no matter how weak - of reality, as the actors pretended. In line with this idea is the widespread assumption that growing sophistication of the colonial government went hand in hand with increasing empirical knowledge of indigenous cultures, which should be mainly a matter of method and adequate theory. But this hypothesis about a direct relation between the development of colonial government and a 'growth' of ethnographic knowledge meets with many contradictions or 'paradoxes' (terms frequently used by Harrison in his book on French colonial government and Islam in West Africa; Harrison, 1988).

However, many of these contradictions disappear if one conceives of the 'knowledge of the Native' as a *construct* rather than as a representation of reality. This knowledge, especially in the form of (ethnographic) writing, allowed colonial civil servants to manipulate at will a self-made subject, to appropriate it on a descriptive level and to make use of it for almost every purpose which occurred to them. Ethnographic 'information' proved adequate argument in political debates, in personal struggles for rehabilitation - the ground for countless pamphlets and books -, in the formation of ideas about economic or religious development.

As a rule the colony was the land of action, of 'doing'; the metropolis the locus of writing.[2] It was mainly there that the object of

[2] Compare Mary Kingsley's ideas about bringing home of facts 'in a raw state'. Without acquaintance with the conditions which surrounded those facts 'in their native homes', they are of little use, according to Kingsley, and would even send 'the distinguished ethnologist' mad (Kingsley, 1897, p. 436 and p. 439).

all this reasoning, the Native, was created. This Native was a *fictio*, to borrow a word from Geertz (Geertz, 1973, p. 15), which figured passively in a cognitive space (Fabian, 1985, p. 9) and which could be manipulated at will. It offered the substance for reasoning characterized, at first sight, by the most blatant contradictions. In many debates concerning native policy, 'experience' was an important quality to command authority. This experience served as proof that the knowledge which supported the proposed policy matched empirical reality. Phrases about 'friendship with the natives' abound in the 'experience-rhetorics'. But the more emphatic experience was claimed, the less need there appeared to be for detailed knowledge of the natives. Experience *par excellence* was embodied in 'Practical Men' who needed information 'written clearly and simply' (see Harrison, 1988, p. 107 and p. 135). This contrast between the richness of the acclaimed friendships with Natives and the poor ethnography by many champions of 'knowledge based on lifetime experience' is only one out of many contradictions which arise if one accepts the empirical pretension of the knowledge.

If this conclusion is justified for the study of indigenous customs in the Dutch East Indies, it will be applicable all the more to Africa (Hailey, 1956, pp. 52-53). Inspired by studies such as those by Bravmann (1974), Prussin (1986) and Harrison (1988), I will now venture into the literature on West Africa which, as I hope, will enable me in due course to compare two colonial traditions. The choice of the subject of this essay is directly linked with my enthusiasm for a continent I only recently 'discovered' (a feeling which, by the way, enables me to understand in a special way the expressions of enchantment and delight so often written down by African explorers), but also with the need to look for topics to explain to students the social and political relevance of recent developments in ethnography which many of them tend to narrow down to a 'literary turn'.

Approach, object and sources

In this essay I will try to survey some notions which helped to create the cognitive space in which debates about the penetration of Islam in West Africa have been enacted. Starting point was a study by

Christopher Harrison: *France and Islam in West Africa, 1860-1960* (1988). In this book Harrison called attention to the 'combined processes of the gathering and utilisation of information about the communities of Africa' (p. 202). Various experiences led to a 'somewhat' contradictory picture of Islam, which guided policies at the end of the nineteenth century. However, although the contradictory views persisted throughout the colonial period, Harrison notes 'a recognisable evolution of thought towards a consensus view of Islam' (*ibid.*, p. 202). To understand this evolution one has firstly to study the growth of colonial scholarship, which was 'inextricably linked with the evolution of thought and policy' (*ibid.*). In his fine and careful study Harrison pays due attention to 'the increasing sophistication of European knowledge of Africa' (*ibid.*, p. 142), a process in which Europeans 'were coming to know more about Africa' (*ibid.*, p. 143). At the same time Harrison acknowledges that the development of this 'knowledge' was influenced by attitudes which seemed to withstand 'any amount of scholarship' (*ibid.*, p. 135). In their turn these attitudes were founded on notions which had the appearance of 'knowledge', no matter how inaccessible they sometimes were for systematic research. Examples of such notions were the ideas about racial intellect or ideas about the (im)possibilities of conversion to Christianity. Relevant 'scientific' theories such as Durkheim's or Levy Bruhl's (*ibid.*, p. 4, p. 146, p. 148), which sometimes had a profound effect on ethnography as well as on policy, derived their effect less from their empirical significance than from their ideological value. This is not to say that these theories did not stimulate improvement of empirical research procedures. As Harrison describes, they formed essential ingredients of several multi-volume ethnographies and studies about African Islam which displayed a thoroughness in detail, also regarding specific areas or ethnic groups, which was - according to Harrison - 'unique' in that period (*ibid.*, p. 117, p. 127). The way these studies met earlier cries for information on the 'minutest detail', to be generated by 'almost' scientific methods (*ibid.*, p. 107), may foster the impression that their empirical quality can hardly be overrated. They seem to fit perfectly the idea that enhanced sophistication of colonial government was made possible by an increase in empirical ethnographic knowledge. But even if one admits that increase in empirical knowledge does not necessarily mean greater consensus, the question arises, how to explain

the many contradictions and paradoxes detected by Harrison?

Considering the vicissitudes which played a role in the gathering and processing of information, one may wonder whether the empirical reality which the ethnographic information pretended to represent, had anything to do with the way in which this knowledge was used. One only has to think of the fact that the process of gathering and describing was dependent on a handful of individuals (e.g. the 'scholarly triumvirate', Harrison, 1988, p. 127 and p. 97 sqq), each with his own fate (e.g. the fact of Coppolani's death, *ibid.*, p. 203)[3] and - above all - his literary qualities (*ibid.*, p. 115); of the way in which wholly conflicting views within the administration appealed to that stream of information, singling out the 'facts' arbitrarily; of the prominent role of sympathies and antipathies (*ibid.*, pp. 148-149), of the (in)accessability of the texts (*ibid.*, p. 4, p. 135). It seems evident that as far as policies were influenced by ethnographic 'facts' and their accumulation, this influence was directly dependent on the 'politics of writing': the way ethnographic experience was transformed into textual representations which helped to construct a convenient image of the world which directed colonial policies (see e.g. Prussin, 1986, p. 19; Mack, 1991, p. 62).

Although Harrison does not pay attention to the 'politics of writing' in a systematic way, his study abounds with remarks on the language of ethnographers and civil servants: metaphors (*ibid.*, p. 29), rhetorics (*ibid.*, pp. 109-110), clichés, derogatory adjectives (*ibid.*, p. 59); the effect of literary qualities, of textual forms and generic features (*ibid.*, p. 101, pp. 115-17, p. 135); the lay-out of the studies (*ibid.*, p. 127); the composition (*ibid.*, p. 129); interrelations between texts and the power of language (*ibid.*, p. 20, p. 97, p. 129) and the relation between object and amount of text (*ibid.*, p. 103). However, all these remarks do not take Harrison to an assessment of the importance of these features of textual construction for the 'processes of the gathering and utilisation' of ethnographic information (*ibid.*, p. 202). By linking the 'increasing sophistication of European knowledge of Africa' (*ibid.*, p. 142) with the

[3] Ironically this death resulted in the opposite of the effect he desired his ethnographic work would have. His violent death contributed to the suspicion authorities held against Islamists.

development of (local) colonial policies, he implicitly accepts the empirical pretensions of that knowledge. Perhaps precisely because of the seemingly self-evidence of the link between growing 'empirical' knowledge and increasing sophistication of colonial administration the study of the combination of gathering and utilisation of that knowledge has - as Harrison notes - for so long been 'a neglected aspect' of colonial rule (*ibid.*, p. 202).

In this contribution I will focus upon two concepts which play a crucial role in the colonial literature about West Africa: the concepts of *primitive* and *islam*. Starting from a reflexive stance, as indicated in the introduction, I tried to survey their synonyms and associated notions in a variety of texts in an attempt to underscore the importance of an approach which treats these texts as constructs for building a 'cognitive space' in which the information can be interpreted and manipulated ('used') at will. This is not to deny any connections between empirical 'reality' and colonial ethnographies or studies. My aim is to attempt an alternative approach to that of Harrison's by looking at those texts as social and literary constructs which may inform us about the 'colonial mind'. In this way I hope to escape the influence of the above-mentioned contemporary pretensions about the inherent empirical quality of ethnographic information which take validity as self-evident and 'growth of knowledge' as an undeniable phenomenon (from this point of view it may be of interest to study *how* the growth was achieved, but there is no doubt about the development itself). The increase in ethnographic detail, embodied in multi-volume ethnographies, which characterizes early twentieth-century colonial administration, may be conceived in terms of 'descriptive appropriation' (Fabian, 1983, p. 166), rather than in terms of 'knowledge approaching more and more reality'.

This view of 'textualisation' of cultures as one aspect of colonial administration offers the possibility to pay attention to the politics of writing and its significance for exercising power, not only to control the colonized peoples, but also to combat political or religious opponents, to influence public opinion or to 'inform' various types of readers, from colonial novices to diplomats.

I feel an important disadvantage of this approach is its fixation on colonial texts which makes it difficult or even impossible to pay due

attention to indigenous voices, especially to those expressed by non-literate means. This domain is beyond my competence and I regret not to be able to estimate the consequences of this shortcoming. Thinking of White's wonderful study *Magomero*, I can only guess they must be serious.

The concepts of *primitive* and *islam* not only figure prominently in the colonial literature about West Africa: they left nobody - neither readers nor writers - unmoved. Whatever the claims about neutrality or 'purely descriptive use', they always incited various connotations, often beyond control of the writer. Their meaning depended heavily on the context and at first sight the concepts seemed suitable for use in the most different situations; utter contradictions could be unified within one and the same word.

For my survey I mainly used sources about British West Africa (in addition to the detailed study by Harrison on French colonies) and I restricted myself to certain types of literature to which Harrison did not pay the attention they deserve with regard to his theme (for differences in the French and British scientific approaches to Islam in West Africa: Prussin, 1986, p. 20). Besides some famous travel books (e.g. Kingsley, 1897; Flint, 1964), collections of newspaper articles (e.g. Morel, 1911 - in those days conceived as 'a study in applied anthropology': p. xvi -), polemical pamphlets (such as Atterbury, 1899), ethnographic 'notes' and surveys by colonial officials or government anthropologists (e.g. Temple & Temple, 1919; Meek, 1931; Rattray, 1932), I paid special attention to some 'genres' of reference works. In particular to 'home libraries' (Werner, 1906) and handbook series like the *Peace Handbooks* (issued by the historical section of the Foreign Office in 1920) and the *Geographical Handbook Series*, issued by the Naval Intelligence Division during the Second World War. These books may be compared to current series like the *Area Handbooks*, issued by the American University and are of special interest to a study of 'the politics of writing'. One of the main characteristics of this genre is that it compresses in an authoritative way the ethnographic 'knowledge', in the meantime claiming all the pretensions of the 'standard works' to which it refers, and sometimes even more. A special 'quality' claimed by this kind of literature is its readability ('written clearly and simply' - Harrison, 1988, p. 135). Some series, like the *Peace Handbooks*, were

composed with a very specific aim. Their publication was justified by indicating that they responded to a great demand for books of practical use ('information in the most convenient form', composed by 'trained writers', 'who (in most cases) gave their services without any renumeration', as the Editorial Note assures).

It is this idea about information-for-direct-use which deserves special attention from a perspective of rhetorical strategies. In many aspects these texts avoid ambiguities. The ethnographic sections are short, organised according to an externally validated scheme and clear-cut. These sections are self-contained units, the incompleteness of which is so evident that it is beyond discussion. This stands in contrast to the massive multi-volume works of government anthropologists like Talbot's (1926) or Rattray's (1923, 1927, 1929). These works are also inherently incomplete, but as their *aim* is approaching completeness (or this quality may be expected by the reader), this aspect is often topic for discussion or vindication. An example is Rattray's Ashanti-trilogy, which influenced official policy (Hailey, 1957, p. 55; Von Laue, 1976). In the second volume, *Religion & Art in Ashanti*, Rattray writes: 'I am afraid, although I have endeavoured to make this volume and *Ashanti* as detailed as possible, that probably many of my descriptions are even now incomplete. When the library of the inquirer has been village, swamp, and forest, and his reference books human beings who have to be handled delicately; when the inquirer is often working under considerable physical discomforts, or physical disabilities, there are bound to be omissions.' (Rattray, 1927, p. vii). Uncertainty is recognised as implying danger (viz. the risk of ethnocentric conjecture: *ibid.*, pp. vii- viii), but it is not evaded. In the same way certain concepts are recognized as problematic, as difficult to define in an unequivocal way. Characteristics like these - together with an enormous mass of details which may be interpreted in various ways - make these works 'good to think' or to 'theorize' ('practical men' often used this concept pejoratively or in contrast to their own activities), but unfit for pragmatic use. In the handbooks they are referred to as authoritative texts and their 'scientific value' is ostentatiously acknowledged.

However, although the authors of the handbooks sometimes copy their style (i.e. forms resembling those of realistic ethnography), they do much more than only condensing or clarifying the 'scientific' texts. That

is where the 'politics of writing' comes in, ironically resulting in second-hand ethnographical texts with much greater political and administrative implication than the original ethnographies. Several features made these early ethnographies especially vulnerable to manipulation and random selection.[4] Therefore these ethnographies themselves facilitated the appropriation of their 'empirical' quality by the handbooks. Judged from this perspective nowadays, the latter seem second-rate and not worth analysing as ethnographic texts. But again this implies an unnoticed acceptance of the empirical pretension, mentioned earlier.

'Good for use' not only implies clearly and simply written, but also well-balanced information (as seen from the perspective of the users at whom the text aims) presented in an unequivocal way. This implies decision-making, smoothing down variations and nuances, while at the same time retaining a reasonable and careful appearance. So, for instance, the Navy Handbook for French West Africa (1943/1944) admits the problematic meaning of the word 'fetish', referring to Seligman's criticism and emphatic advice to avoid the concept. Nevertheless the word has been maintained in this text because it is 'a useful word' (FWA Vol.I, p. 232). This is reminiscent of Mary Kingsley! Another recurrent problem is the enormous diversity of peoples and cultures. This leads to standard phrases as 'It is difficult to generalize about their character, but at bottom...' (Belgian Congo, 1944, pp. 157-158), or 'Despite innumerable differences in detail, there is marked similarity in essentials...' (Peace Handbook, 1920, Vol. XV, 90, p. 4). In case of sources contradicting each other, the problem is solved on the spot, e.g. in Peace Handbook XVI, 99, p. 48, citing two travel reports about the same district containing divergent information. However, these kinds of 'discussions' are rare.

[4] For example I think of the exclusively individual authority, often fostered by the ethnographers themselves. An example is Rattray: according to Von Laue he considered himself as the only person capable of fulfilling the task of Ashanti ethnography (Von Laue, 1976, p. 37). Various other points are: the enormous diversity in structure of these ethnographies, lacking the 'genre characteristics' which gave the realistic ethnographies their authority; omnivorous approach; historical conjectures; resemblance to genres of natural history. Léon Buskens' contribution to this book also examines characteristics of ethnography transformed in handbooks and in codifications.

The empirical pretension is further enhanced by the format of the books, especially when a close connection with the scientific world is claimed, as in the case of the Geographical Handbook Series (maps, tables, photographs, line drawings, etc.; see also Thornton, 1983). Even the fact that the books have been printed by the prestigious scientific Oxford and Cambridge U.P.'s is emphatically mentioned in the Prefaces.

Because of their generic qualities, these compilations - flirting with science but serving above all 'practice' - are of special interest to the study of textual manipulation resulting in the construction of 'realities' in which words gained their 'fixed value'. I will now examine some of those words.

The concepts of primitive and islam

In her beautiful study *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa*, Labelle Prussin points out that up to the present arbitrary boundaries continue to be drawn between the world of 'pagan' Africa and 'Muslim' Africa. She relates this fact to attitudes, which 'reflect the deep-seated, historically evolved patterns of theoretical misconception and misinterpretation'. 'Rather than mere oversight, such attitudes are the conceptual legacy of a marriage between ideological fallacy and both Western and Muslim ethno- and egocentrism.' (Prussin, 1986, p. 4). 'Primitive' and 'Islam' are only other words to designate the same boundary and Prussin's criticism applies equally to them. Thinking of Sahlins' recent study (1989), one may say that concepts relating to boundaries never reflect in a neutral way a 'given' empirical reality, but that they always stand for emotions, attitudes, ideologies and policies which created the reality they designate. The boundary may be between religions, between disciplines, between political systems or between colonial spheres of influence. It always makes a world of difference from which side the boundary is approached.

The boundary between African Islam and 'primitive' Africa was of major concern to the colonial powers penetrating West Africa. It was the boundary between the familiar and the unknown; between the feared and the despised, between order and chaos, between the aggressive and the vulnerable, between the picturesque and the ugly, between the

clothed and the naked, between religion and superstition, between civilisation and nature, between history and the timeless, between charm and idol, between the expanding and the disappearing, between literacy and the illiterate, between language and idiom, between the unified or uniform and the fragmented, between monotheism and polytheism, between doctrine and witchcraft, just to mention some of the many connotations to be encountered in the colonial literature. All these spheres met in the conception of this border and became interchangeable. Therefore the same ideological 'operators' which Fabian sees at work in the process of the colonization of African languages may be traced in the conceptualisations of this boundary: space, time, the idea of hierarchical order, etc. (Fabian, 1983).

Of course the border between African Islam and primitive Africa is a construct. Sometimes it is textualised in terms of a geographical entity (10° latitude North of the Equator), at times in historical terms (the dynamics of 'penetration'), or in a combination of both. In the Handbook of French Equatorial Africa, for instance, life in the Islamic regions is depicted as that of the 'Middle Ages'. Crossing the border to pagan Africa means returning to the 'Stone Age'. When the border shifts 'the African is being hustled over centuries of history' (1942, p. 216). In this text progress is expressed by metaphors of spatial movement. For instance: the African 'comes naked out of the Bush and goes to work in a garage' (*ibid.*). On the other hand travelling to the Sudan is like entering 'a new world - the world of Islam. It is also a return to feudalism and the Middle Ages.' (1942, p. 215).

In analysing spatial expressions of the relation between Islamic and 'primitive' Africa it is important to note that the early colonial literature about a large part of Islamic Africa (notably the area of the pastoral cultures) mostly refers to travel literature for its ethnographic information, whereas descriptions of pagan Africa derive this kind of information mostly from missionary accounts, or from reports by civil servants. In nineteenth century travelbooks it was usual to indicate regions in terms of travel routes (e.g. Robinson's *Hausaland, or fifteen hundred miles through the Central Sudan*, 1900). There is even a striking resemblance between the characteristics ascribed to the peoples met with on the way and the qualities of a 'typical day of African

travel' (*ibid.*, p. 93). Within the texts by one and the same writer a striking difference in wording may sometimes be noticed if one compares notes taken *en route* with descriptions written *in situ*. Perhaps one may even distinguish two traditions of intertextuality: that of travel accounts and that of ethnography. During his voyage upstream the Niger Morel's evocative language is reminiscent of the mysteries from the days of Denham and Lander (Morel, 1911, pp. 92-93). Elsewhere he compares the spread of Islam with the annual overflow of this river (*ibid.*, p. 76). On the other hand, in an ethnographic study he terms the Yoruba 'the Baganda of West Africa' (referring to the East African 'tribe' well known from ethnographic classics - *ibid.*, p. 217). Although in itself this 'literary bias' need not to be of special importance, it enhanced in a delicate, but nevertheless substantial way the general trend to lend a 'mobile' aspect to the descriptions of Islam in West Africa.

To the colonial powers the 'penetration' of Islam was of special importance. This penetration could be defined in spatial terms: the extension of Islam into 'pagan fields'. Within the colonies this process could be studied and measures could be taken to stop it. Even many officials who had a favourable opinion about the civilising effect of Islam, feared the ongoing extension of Islamic influence. This fear, which easily became an obsession (Lewis, 1966, p. 14; Stewart, 1986, p. 204), may account for the fact - noticed by Lewis when he started his survey - that the available literature on Islam in Africa (which he, by the way, characterized as largely superficial and inadequate) stressed, as a rule, the *pushing forward* of Islam, without, however, giving much insight into its contemporary significance in any given social context (Lewis, 1966, p. 3).

The spatial extension of Islam could be expressed in various ways: and each way, in its turn, could serve to indicate the opposite. For instance, according to some writers the development of the infrastructure was in favour of the spread of Islam, while at the same time giving the Europeans the opportunity to curb its political strength - and with that the *raison d'être* of Islam, as others thought. In like way opinions varied about the area effectively occupied by Islam or about the significance of inter-tribal languages. Where some stressed, for instance, the importance of the spread of Swahili in Central Africa in favour of Arab traders,

others pointed out that the same could be said for the Christian missions: 'The language of the slave-trade has been utilised as the language of the Word of God' (Atterbury, 1899, p. 151). Designation of vast territories conquered by Islam could be 'corrected' by indicating the desolation of most of those areas or by stressing their decline (Atterbury, 1899 versus Blyden, 1888).

The penetration of Islam meant the retreat of 'primitive' Africa. Spatial expressions of that process are especially interesting concerning the areas outside the European sphere of influence; conjectures about the meeting of Islam and the primitive in the 'far interior' of the continent. In the endless forests Islam would simply dissolve, some writers thought. In these areas, 'trackless and impenetrable' as they were, trade-bound, materialistic African Islam would stand no chance; it would evaporate. This was the terrain for explorers: they had to bring civilisation. 'The responsibility falls upon those who are now engaged in making the map of Africa' (Atterbury, 1899, p. 177). Repugnance to the witchcraft and pagan superstitions of primitive Africa for a moment made place for ideas about the vulnerability of those primitive tribes who needed protection. Another theme which deserves attention here is the description of the means by which Islam was 'conveyed'. There was a sharp contrast between the 'silent' spread of Islam by lonely, ascetic, thoughtful and holy 'mallams' and the white preachers, travelling in caravans of 'weary carriers, conveying boxes full of food, drink, apparel, and camp furniture' (Morel, 1911, p. 25).

The silent secrecy of the travelling 'mullahs' matched the natural way in which the African superstitions originally grew up: 'fungus-like, in its dark places' (Talbot, 1912, p. 13). Especially in the context of islamophobia the idea of 'silent proselytism' engendered a great variety of expressions reflecting the fear of being confronted with a process beyond control. In contrast to observable 'means of conveyance' (such as those belonging to the domain of literacy: charms, books, etc. - see Greenberg, 1946, p. 10, p. 64), this sphere of hidden forces lent itself to the most extravagant suspicions. The uncertainty was enhanced by the lack of insight into the reasons why some tribal groups reacted positively upon Islam, whereas others withstood its influence. Ethnographic information to explain the erratic and unpredictable course African religions could take in response to Islam (Gilliland, 1986, p. 19)

was all too scarce.

The idea of secret expansion of Islam in Africa ('burning only in patches' in contrast to the 'forest fire' of classical Islamic spread) was linked in various ways to impressions about the 'reality' of the conversion and to theories about the similarities between Islamic doctrine and primitive superstitions or tribal customs in order to explain the conjectured consistency of the penetration. These descriptions and theories weakened the contrasts conceptualised between Islam and the primitive from other viewpoints (e.g. those using Christianity as frame of reference). As it seems to me descriptions in 'spatial terms' tend to blur the conceptual boundaries between Islam and primitive (as far as the area south of 10° latitude was concerned), whereas descriptions using 'cultural concepts' tend to emphasize the distinctions. The latter, in their turn, could be used in several ways: Islamic penetration in Africa conceptualized as resulting in fragmentation ('African Islam' as 'local Islam') or conversion seen as the adoption of a new identity. The way in which these conjectured effects were experienced by the Europeans influenced the selection of cultural 'characteristics' ascribed to Islam and primitive culture respectively. Indicators of ethnic identity were often described in evaluative terms or contexts.[5]

It is clear that definitions of concepts like 'Islam' or 'primitive' heavily depended on the perspective used or on the context. Admirers of Islam conceptualised 'primitive Africa' in a way different from e.g. missionaries. With every change of perspective the conceptualisation could change substantially, often in an imperceptible way underscored by special rhetorics, metaphors, etc. In order to gain insight into the 'politics of writing' as a strategy to blend ethnographic detail and ideological purpose it may be useful not only to compare several *genres* of informative literature, but also to analyse and compare the 'literary

[5] An example is the relation between clothing and identity. In the colonial texts the communication that Islam 'clothes the native' is often an occasion for denigratory denotations. The voluminous Arab clothing ('not so difficult to adopt', according to the Geographical Handbook Belgian Congo, p. 180), is symbol for superficial conversion ('so-called Muslims' - Handbook French Equatorial Africa, p. 212). Conversion of the naked pagans is 'simply putting on Arab clothing' or is only 'a change of costume' (Atterbury, p. 142, who adds that by clothing the primitive 'Islam makes a man of the pagan', p. 154).

contexts' in which the various 'ideological operators' come to light, such as done above in a provisional way for expressions of space.

It may be tempting to draw up an inventory of contrasts or similarities between 'Islam', 'primitive' and 'Western civilization' (Christianity), or to enumerate the various adjectives adhered to those concepts (for instance to serve structural analysis).[6] But then we may loose sight of the literary contexts, so vital to the 'politics of writing'.

[6] It may be interesting to make an inventory of synonyms or of adjectives: village Islam, domestic Islam, bastardized Islam, retrograde Islam, invasive Islam, xenophobic Islam, local Islam, nominal Islam, ethnic Islam, international Islam, Koranic Islam, pure Islam, just to mention a few of many expressions I met in the texts. But, because of the wide variety of sources to be used, interpretations pose specific literary/historical problems to be solved. The same counts for an inventory of oppositions, easy to draw up, and nice-looking:

Primitive	Islam
tribe (traditional)	state
race	mankind
dialect/speech	language
barbarous/savage	(semi) civilized
natural drives	fasting/formulae
chaos	system
bush	village/city
unruled	law
heterogeneous	homogeneous/unifying
naked	clothed
childish/submissive	arrogant
ahistorical/prehistorical	historical
tradition	actuality
self-supporting/isolated	trade/pilgrimage
disappearing	spreading/growing
original	corrupt
vulnerable	powerful/aggressive
polytheism/distant monotheism	monotheism
idolatry	religion
fetishism/animist practices	worship
gaiety ('merry fetishist')	serious-minded
lacking artistic qualities	artistic qualities
external dynamics	internal dynamics

This is an example of such an inventory, made up from the sources I used, irrespective of the context. In itself it is meaningless, for the slightest shift in perspective may produce countless changes. Inventories as this one at first sight suggest (binary) oppositions which lend themselves for types of paradigmatic research such as those used by structuralists. But in that kind of analysis the distance from the narrative context poses nearly insurmountable problems and easily leads to ignoring that context.

Conclusion

This paper contains some reflections upon a survey of expressions concerning *Islam* and *primitive* I am engaged in. I hope this subject may help to assess the relations between 'knowledge of the Native' and 'ethnographic information' within the sphere of colonial (administrative and religious) policies. More than half a century ago Rattray wondered why missionaries, to whom anthropology was so much obliged, did not make more practical use of their knowledge (Rattray, 1923, p. 87). When Harrison chose the combination of gathering and utilisation of ethnographic knowledge as subject for his study, he had to conclude that his research concerned a neglected aspect of colonial rule (Harrison, 1988, p. 202). I think that by essentially accepting the empirical pretensions of the colonial ethnographic knowledge, one tends to put the two kinds of knowledge (i.e. ethnography and practical information) in a direct line. The study of the actual historical relation between (ethnographic) knowledge and the way in which it was used raised questions like Rattray's or contradictions and paradoxes like Harrison's. From the perspective of the topic of this conference, the politics of ethnographic writing, I focused on 'literary' aspects of the transformation of ethnographic into practical knowledge, paying attention to the significance of genres not analysed by Harrison and trying to demonstrate the way in which an 'ideological operator' like space worked to combine various (and often conflicting) contents around two central notions. What significance may be assigned to the uncontrolled extension of connotations relating to these notions? By interpreting these notions as constructs of the African worlds which were the subject of various forms of European writing, inconsistencies and continuous shifts in meaning - problematic as these are from an 'empirical' perspective - may be explained: these notions served an image, rather than the pretended reality. The content of the terms was not determined in the first place by 'reality', but was fixed 'among us'.

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WRITING ABOUT EASTERN EUROPE:
Perspectives from ethnography and anthropology

Longina Jakubowska

In 1970, Tamas Hofer, a Hungarian ethnographer, addressing an international conference consisting mostly of American scholars, wrote:

> A growing number of American anthropologists are coming over to [Eastern] Europe to study (...) peasant and post-peasant villages. The same villages have been explored for one hundred and fifty years by ethnographers of the nations concerned, who specialized in studying the folk component of their own cultural heritage. However, contact between the American and European workers is scanty and rather casual (1970, p. 5).

Considering the scale of the social experiment carried out this century in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe[1], the depth of change which followed and its political repercussions throughout the world, the interest shown in the region and the knowledge acquired about its cultural and social processes is minuscule. This is particularly puzzling in the light of considerable institutional support, albeit politically motivated, established to encourage such scholarship. The scholarship, especially American, was heavily influenced by conservative political science. Difficulties in achieving an unbiased perspective on a very different social and cultural

[1] 'Eastern Europe' and 'Western Europe', are political concepts and only roughly correspond to physical geography of the continent. As the East-West division became obsolete in the post-communist order, changes are also made in topology and the term 'Eastern Europe' is increasingly substituted by the more accurate geo-cultural category of 'Central' or 'Central-Eastern Europe'. In this paper I will however use the traditional term 'Eastern Europe' to denote the former socialist block countries; to a large extent, they historically faced common political problems and underwent similar developments in social sciences.