

An Imperfect Interpreter?⁵

Reading *Butterflies and Barbarians* proved to be a slow, but very satisfying experience, mainly, I would say, on account of the creation-of-knowledge theme, of the intricacy of the data, and of the depth and quality of the argumentation. Being a keen reader of early archaeological and anthropological literature, I find the subject matter of the study fascinating. In the following pages, I will examine Chapter 8, which provides the conclusion of the epistemological analysis, for which the preceding chapters have paved the way.

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5. The title was inspired by W.D. Hammond-Tooke's short history of South African anthropology: *Imperfect Interpreters. South Africa's Anthropologists 1920-1990* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 1997).

I really enjoyed reading the first section of *Anthropology* (Chapter 8), in which Harries explores the general historical setting of Junod's enthusiastic quest for new knowledge,⁶ and the specific institutions and personalities that shaped his intellectual horizon (for example Basel, Berlin, Bachofen, Agassiz and Bryce). From this revealing analysis, Junod emerges as an entomologist and botanist converted to anthropology through the mediation of language and folklore. His project: recording a culture threatened with extinction; his methodology: the natural science model (p 209).

In addition to producing a number of books and scientific articles on African culture, Junod involved himself actively in the question of "native education". He promoted industrial training and the vernacular, and produced textbooks on science for his students (p 212). Junod, we are told, was an active member of the International Organisation for the Defence of Native Peoples. Because of the emphasis on respect for indigenous culture, and the native point of view in his ethnography, the Swiss missionary received strong support at the historic International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. His essays were also welcomed by Van Gennep for publication in his *Revue des études ethnographiques et sociologiques* (p 213).

In the enlarged edition of his major ethnographic work (*The Life of a South African Tribe*), Harries suggests, the missionary described an African system of thought that was not much different from the European conceptualization of the world (p 213). He was, clearly, an intellectual heir of a brand of anthropology "informed by the thrill of exploration and the struggle against slavery" (p 215), who opposed the more bigoted approaches to "primitive culture" of contemporary authors such as Lévy-Bruhl and Kidd (pp 215 & 218). The two volume monograph became an instant classic, admired by Frazer, Seligman, Rivers, Schmidt, Malinowski, Schapera and others (pp 213 & 215).

Surprisingly, then, the generally positive appraisal of Junod is somehow redirected in the remaining two thirds of Chapter 8. Here, *The Life of a South African Tribe*, previously the product of an enlightened missionary, is re-presented to the reader as an impersonal and authoritative scientific treatise on the Thonga "species and its reproduction" (pp 216 & 233). Junod, we are told, had promoted ethnic taxonomies in museum displays and dioramas that "turned the museum in

6. For example, the 1870s depression in Europe, the establishment of geographical societies and the defeat of the Gaza Empire. Especially see pp 206 & 210.

a time capsule that carried the visitor into a past stripped of change or history” (p 217). The diorama – inspired by exhibits of biological specimens in their natural environment – and related forms of ethnographic display promoted by Junod, Harries explains, are nothing less than visible, tangible means of representing “Africans as naturally tribal peoples fixed at an inferior level of evolution” (pp 217 & 218). Worse still, Junod stands accused of having arranged African societies “according to a hierarchy of evolution that would indicate how best they would be ruled” (pp 218 & 230).

In Harries’ understanding, Junod also has ignored, or underplayed exploitative labour practices in Mozambique and the Transvaal (pp 222-223 & 225), and has unethically manipulated all sorts of visual materials to reconstruct a fictitious “authentic African” society (pp 218 & 228). Although it is never stated explicitly, the reader is left to conclude that Junod was an active contributor to, rather than a passive spectator of the colonial systems of oppression in Southern Africa. Harries’ critique is derived from a thoughtful analysis of the theoretical grounding of Junod’s work, which I will now revisit.

Central to Junod’s epistemology, the author reiterates throughout the study, is the natural science model. His major work, *The Life of a South African Tribe*, he explains, is written in the French sociological tradition – Comte’s positivism, I presume – and as such conceives of society as a “biological organism made up of various functioning parts” (p 211).

In *The Life of a South African Tribe*, Harries suggests, the “tribe” is defined as a homogeneous, organic unit with a life of its own, a soul and a capacity to reproduce (p 219). Its constituent parts – clans and linguistic groups – are similarly portrayed as homogeneous entities, much like the genera of plants and insects (p 218). Junod’s kind of anthropology is, therefore, a naturalist study of humanity. It is based on direct observation, the key methodology of the study of zoological and botanical species (pp 219, 220 & 224).

The biological model or “organic analogy” which Harries traces in Junod’s construction of knowledge, is a core feature of biosocial Evolutionism.⁷ Its origins are aptly summarised in Marrett’s legendary credo: “Anthropology is the child of Darwin”. Harries’

7. In a much more sophisticated form, the concept of organic analogy becomes a key feature in the theoretical orientation known as Structural-Functionalism.

judgement, when he associates this kind of anthropology with racist views, is fair. Personally, I would happily bin *The Life of a South African Tribe* with all the distorted nonsense that was produced in the second half of the nineteenth century under the label of the “Science of Man”. Fortunately, I do not have to, since Junod’s monograph is, at least in my understanding, not really exemplar of this paradigm.

There is a second, much older, and more influential stream of Evolutionism,⁸ the intellectual roots of which can be traced back to the Enlightenment and to the general social science formulated, amongst others, by the Scottish moral philosophers, almost a century before Darwinism.⁹ In this natural history of “mankind”, the psychic unity of “Man” and the supra-organic essence of culture feature centrally and references to skull capacities and other irrelevant biological measures of humanity are absent from the debates on the origins of culture.

The humanistic, liberal-progressive stream of Evolutionism underlies many of the views of Tylor, who is commonly perceived as the founder of Anthropology. A great deal of Tylor’s energy, and of those who produced anthropological texts within the same stream, was directed towards finding the oldest forms or the origins of cultural practices and beliefs: a kind of archaeography. Tylor and other “armchair anthropologists” explored culture and society as some sort of intellectual playground where mysteries could be unmasked and riddles solved. Demonstrating the racial superiority of the West was not really part of their analytical agenda.

There are references to higher and lower forms of humanity or “races” in Junod’s discussion of ethnographic data, but he strongly opposed any biological base for an evolutionary division or classification of humanity. Junod, Harries indicates truthfully, distanced himself of the racism of Vogt and others (pp 234-235). He proposed that all humankind had one, single origin and that the stagnation of some societies could be explained satisfactorily with reference to external environmental or internal social factors. Most importantly, stagnation could be undone and upliftment or betterment of the “weaker” was deemed to be a part of the mission of an enlightened social scientist (p 233).

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8. Some anthropologists go as far as to suggest that the concept of biological analogy and the influence of Darwin on the discipline was, on the whole, very limited. See, for example: A. de Waal-Malefijt, *Images of Man. A History of Anthropological Thought* (A.A. Knopf, New York, 1979).
 9. For a good exposé of the origins of anthropology, I recommend F.W. Voget, *A History of Ethnology* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1975).

In the same fashion it could be said that classification, taxonomy and comparative analysis are key components in Junod's discourse, and that his methodology was inspired by the natural sciences. However, they are not indicative of socio-biological Evolutionism. They are research tools engaged for the purpose of reliable data collection. As such there is no agenda, hidden or otherwise, of dehumanizing the people under study. On the contrary, in the instance of the analysis of kinship terminology, Harries concedes, classification exemplifies how "Africans were able to order their lives and infuse them with reason" (p 230). The scientific study of the social organisation of the Thonga, Junod points out, evidences how "their" thinking resembles that of modern humans and highlights the contributions the "tribe" made to the development of humanity (p 236).

In view of Junod's intellectual formation and of the history of the religious institution he represents – so meticulously examined in Chapters 1 and 8 – it seems fair, then, to rank the Swiss missionary amongst the more enlightened of the early anthropological researchers.

To be sure, in the preface to *The Life of a South African Tribe*, Junod defines the subject matter as "a collection of biological phenomena" and the family, clans and tribe as "social organisms".¹⁰ However, as Harries has keenly noted, the missionary, by the same token, reminds the reader that the study of a "tribe" as a "living thing" should not be confounded with the study of birds or insects (p 216). In fact, "Man is infinitely more interesting than the insect!"¹¹ To the philanthropic anthropologist, writing in the tradition of progressivist developmentalism, the use of "organic analogy" is little more than metaphorical for the intellectual thoroughness associated with a scientific inquiry.¹²

Yes, Junod explicitly aligns himself with "scientific" research. The aim of collecting ethnographic data is, in his words, "first of all scientific".¹³ No anthropologist, on the other hand, would look for the trademarks of a positivist, empiricist or behaviourist discourse in this or any other early ethnography. At the time that *The Life of a South African Tribe* was produced, Structural-Functionalism was scarcely on the drawing board and the concept of culture as reference to the shared ideas

10. H.A. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe* (Macmillan, London, 1927), pp 7 & 9.

11. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, p 1.

12. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, p 9.

13. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, p 7.

and actions of a collectivity of humans had only just been formulated. Therefore, a systematic critique of the authoritative ethnographer who suppresses the “native voice” seems more suited to the anthropology that was produced after the era of the cultural history schools.

Junod’s scientific approach is not exactly my kind of anthropology. When a textbook on rock art recently defined spirituality or religion as “a way of coming to terms with the electrochemical functioning of the brain”,¹⁴ I gladly joined those who opposed this materialist view of culture. Junod’s “biological phenomena”, in contrast, hardly qualify as suitable material for an anti-positivist dispute. In any case, Junod reminds the reader that, “to work for science is noble; but to help our fellow men is nobler still”,¹⁵ and in the same spirit: “Science has never opposed the betterment and ennoblement of humanity!”¹⁶

Of course, much of what he has to say about the so-called “Thonga tribe” today sounds paternalistic, however, his discursive style is gentle and humble, and more importantly, his intentions seem honourable and his attitude towards Africans and their culture, respectful. This is, for example, exemplified by his section on “Thonga tales”, from which I recently selected some teaching material. He did not think it was necessary to modify the form or contents of the indigenous literature, unlike Bloomhill in her study of Southern African folklore, half a century later. She tried to “justify” her approach by stating that “Many African legends are crude and long-drawn, and not at all to European taste until they are clipped into shape.”¹⁷

Junod’s sociological analysis of folklore, I must add, is amazingly perceptive and by no means inferior to modern interpretations.¹⁸

Measured by nineteenth and early twentieth-century standards, Junod was an open-minded liberal, who gratefully acknowledged his research assistants in superlative terms:

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14. D. Lewis-Williams and D. Pearce, *San Spirituality. Roots, Expressions and Social Consequences* (Double Storey, Cape Town, 2004).
 15. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, p 10.
 16. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, p 11.
 17. G. Bloomhill, *The Sacred Drum* (Howard Timmens, Cape Town 1960).
 18. See, for example: I. le Roux, “Net die woorde het oorgebly: ’n godsdienswetenskaplike interpretasie van Venda volksverhale (ngano).” DLitt and Phil thesis, Unisa, 1996.

I owe to them most of my knowledge.¹⁹

I owe to him most of what I know about ...²⁰

He and Mankhelu have taught me most of what I know about ...²¹

He described them as profoundly knowledgeable, very kind-hearted, clever, clear-headed, very intelligent and, in one case, as “a true friend”.²² Junod, furthermore, seems to admit to the reader that his understanding is only of a limited nature, when he refers to the “immense complexity of the life of a South African tribe”,²³ and to the fact that the bulk of the data was procured in a small research area.²⁴ He realised the magnitude of the project and understood his monograph to be only a work-in-progress.

If Junod treated history as a minimal, almost marginal aspect of his study, he certainly did not turn a blind eye to it all together (how could he, being a cultural historian?). *The Life of a South African Tribe* contains a reasonably extensive section on “Thonga history” in the preliminary chapter, and a more controversial narrative on the “evolution” of the “tribe” in the second volume.

He did ignore the powers of individual creativity,²⁵ varied historical experiences, the unconventional, the non-conformist or the dissident (pp 217 & 233), just like every other early anthropologist, including the “professional” ones. He also minimized the “human capacity for imitation and borrowing” (p 217), but then again, he was an evolutionist, not a diffusionist. He certainly did not ignore variation of cultural data:

This general sequence [of the funerary rites] I found in all the clans. But the rites themselves differ greatly; I shall try to depict these differences clearly.²⁶

19. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, p 3.

20. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, p 4.

21. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, p 6.

22. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, pp 4-6.

23. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, p 6.

24. See, for example, Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe* II, p 5.

25. Junod did dwell on individual variation and creativity in the discussion of storytelling and on cultural borrowing when discussing, for example, the xylophone.

26. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, p 144.

I am not sure why Junod would possibly have wanted to “fix the Thonga at some lower level of evolution”? Rather, in the tradition of the romantic-enlightened notion of the Noble Savage, and with philanthropic objectives in mind, he traced the leftovers of the pre-contact/base line culture of an indigenous people. He did not always like what he discovered, but celebrated what he thought to be useful in the modern age.

Naïve and stereotypical? Certainly, but even if Junod created a myth, a monolithic ethnic fantasy, and even if “salvaging” the past may seem a rather irrelevant kind of pastime today, his humanist objective should be appreciated:

Should I succeed in eliciting new and more enlightened sympathy amongst the Whites for our Native brethren, should this book prevent the gulf which separates the races from becoming wider, I think it will have been worth writing it.²⁷

Harries also includes in his charge sheet Junod’s uncritical association between language, culture and nation. My first thought is that this, perhaps, should be a judgement better reserved for those “anthropologists” who continued to participate in nationalist politics until the late 1980s. After all, they had a choice. They had the benefit of the post-1968 intellectual revolution and all the critical post-modern thinking that emerged from it.

Junod, we are told, depends on language for the unity and coherence of the Thonga tribe/nation he had discovered, if not invented. He does not simply use language and culture as markers of identity; he conflates linguistic and social categories. In fact, he reifies linguistic concepts (Bantu, Ronga, Thonga) into social entities with a mind and soul, like the Aryans (sic!). In doing so, he (once more) resembles the naturalist who collects and creates the distinguishable species of plants or beetles (pp 216 & 217).²⁸

Junod uses language as a unifying factor. He studies “Thonga culture”, in the same fashion, I would say, as the classical historians and archaeologists, who research ancient “Greek culture” or civilisation, meaning the culture of Greek-speaking people in the many independent political city-states, and when Junod underlines the importance of language as a marker of “Thonga” identity, he also highlights the developed and sophisticated nature of the vernacular (p 216).

27. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, p 10.

28. The close resemblance between the methodologies of the naturalist, linguist and ethnographer is a central theme in *Barbarians and Butterflies*.

The “Thonga tribe” is a collection of speakers of the Thonga vernacular. The use of the word “tribe”, Junod emphasises in his preface, is incidental.²⁹ For the author of *The Life of a South African Tribe*, tribe, clan and group are simply working concepts, devoid of explicit or hidden political connotations. Junod, in his conception of culture, was, at worst, as misled or naïve as the prehistorians who used (and continue to use, in spite of the 1970s New Archaeology) particular artefacts or names of locations to re-create vanished “cultures” or peoples.³⁰ Incidentally, Junod’s linguistic-organic criteria for the delineation of his monograph, were, as Harries noted, denounced as unscientific by his opponents, the Swiss Physical Anthropologists. Junod, from his side, “remained sceptical throughout his life of the materialist approach to the study of humanity” (p 208).

More importantly, Junod himself readily admits that there is no national unity amongst the people he set out to study! They have no common name and the choice of the word “Thonga”, an unpopular nickname applied to them by Zulu speakers, he fully realises, is not quite satisfactory. He decided to use “Thonga”, because the term is also a neutral reference to “people from the east”.³¹

A final note on the so-called “manipulation” of images: photographs depicting the “authentic Thonga” are actually relatively few. They are expressive, I suppose, of the author’s archaeography and his explicit intention of representing “a South African tribe in a previous stage of evolution”. The majority of the pictures simply depict the daily chores and activities of rural people in different stages of acculturation.

In conclusion: *The Life of a South African Tribe* lacks the colonial or nationalist agenda that became, rightfully, the focus of the “creation of tribalism” literature within the post-modern and post-colonial paradigm.³²

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29. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, p 14.

30. For example, the “Villa Nova” culture in North Italy’s Iron Age, or the “Beaker people” in the Stone Age of Northwestern Europe. The association artefact-culture became the object of fierce debate in the New Archaeology of the late 1970s.

31. Junod, *The Life of a South-African Tribe*, pp 14-16.

32. Locally, E. Boonzaier and J. Sharp (eds), *South African Keywords: The Uses and Abuses of Political Concepts* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1988), must be mentioned as the most extensive critique of nationalist anthropology.