MAPPING ENTANGLEMENTS: DYNAMICS OF MISSIONARY KNOWLEDGE AND "MATERIALITIES" ACROSS SPACE AND TIME (16TH TO 20TH CENTURIES)

Workshop at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI), February 10-11, 2017. Conveners: Sabina Brevaglieri (GHI Rome), Elisabeth Engel (GHI) in collaboration with the History of Knowledge Research Group at the GHI Washington and the GHI Rome. Participants: Ana Rita Amaral (University of Lisbon), Martin Baumeister (GHI Rome), Eva Bischoff (University of Trier), Christopher Blakley (Rutgers University), Manuela Bragagnolo (Max-Planck-Institut für europäische Rechtsgeschichte, Frankfurt), Sabina Brevaglieri (GHI Rome), José Casanova (Georgetown University), Otto Danwerth (Max-Planck-Institut für europäische Rechtsgeschichte, Frankfurt), Jeffrey M. Diamond (Clarion University), Elisabeth Engel (GHI), Fabian Fechner (Fernuniversität Hagen), Cécile Fromont (University of Chicago), Rebekka Habermas (University of Göttingen), Richard Hölzl (University of Göttingen), Florence Hsia (University of Wisconsin-Madison), Simone Lässig (GHI), David Lazar (GHI), David Lindenfeld (Louisiana State University), Anne Mariss (University of Regensburg), Maud Michaud (Université du Maine, Le Mans), John O’Malley (Georgetown University), Senayon Olaoluwa (University of Ibadan), Federico Palomo (Universidad Complutense, Madrid), Irina Pawlowsky (University of Tübingen), Ines Prodöhl (GHI), Justin Reynolds (Columbia University), Regina Sarreiter (Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin), Chandra C. Sekhar (English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad), Ulrike Strasser (University of California, San Diego), Stefano Villani (University of Maryland), Kerstin von der Krone (GHI), Guillermo Wilde (National Scientific Council of Argentina, Buenos Aires).

Investigations into the history of missionary societies constitute an expanding field in colonial and global historiography. Contributing to this body of research, this workshop focused on a specific aspect of missionary history. It examined missionaries as key actors of production and transfer of knowledge across cultural, geographical, and social boundaries. As such, the workshop, adopting the perspective of the history of knowledge, aimed at providing new insights into the entangled history of the modern world. It was divided into six panels, each focusing on a specific aspect of missionary knowledge production.

The first panel on “Negotiations” examined the ways and means in which missionaries contributed to the production of scientific
knowledge about the colonial Other. Christopher Blakley investigated the link between missionary plantation economy, slavery, and anatomical knowledge on eighteenth-century Barbados. Richard Hölzl reconstructed the production of ethnographic knowledge about intimate bodily practices by members of the Catholic mission in German East Africa, arguing that missionaries created an alternative body of ethnographic knowledge that did not enter academic discourses and curricula. Similarly, Maud Michaud demonstrated how anthropological knowledge gathered by the missionaries as well as the material artefacts that represented it were displayed in missionary exhibitions across the British Empire to promote the religious work of the societies. She revealed how these displays established a domain in which ethnographic knowledge circulated beyond the academic sphere.

In the second panel on “Translations and Transformation” three case studies investigated a key aspect of missionary work, namely negotiating the complexities of cultural translation. Stefano Villani retraced the steps of early Quaker traveling ministers and their activities in Catholic Europe. Fabian Fechner reconstructed how Jesuit compendia of medicinal plants were employed in nineteenth-century efforts to establish South American nation states as “imagined communities.” He emphasized the political and symbolic value of manuscripts as sources for the newly established national historiographies and as diplomatic gifts. Senayon Olaoluwa demonstrated how Ogu converts in southwestern Nigeria translated the biblical story of original sin into narratives of the royal python in pre-Christian Ogu culture, thereby resolving questions about the serpent’s ambiguous role as God’s instrument and seducer of mankind.

In her keynote lecture, “Mapping Entanglements: Missionary Knowledge in Colonial Times,” Rebekka Habermas discussed three characteristics of missionary knowledge and its connection to processes producing knowledge around 1900. The first element of missionary knowledge was its secular side. Bringing the gospel to future Christians involved building a corpus of practical knowledge instrumental to a mission’s success, namely developing an (at least basic) understanding of local languages and of the mindset of prospective converts. Colonial rule as well as many academic fields in the humanities and social sciences (most prominently linguistic disciplines and anthropology) benefited from the information gathered by missionaries “in the field.” Secondly, Habermas pointed out, it is important to acknowledge the religious character of missionary knowledge.
Although arising from the practical necessities of missionary work and often in collaboration with local intermediaries, it was deeply structured by the missionaries’ religious beliefs and values. This aspect becomes most obvious in considering the materiality of knowledge production: Missionaries not only collected cultural artefacts but also destroyed those they identified as fetish objects. In a seemingly paradoxical move, they created knowledge by demolishing cultural heritage. Simultaneously, missionaries shaped and reinforced a specific knowledge of boundaries (civilized-primitive, Christian-heathen, superstition/magic-religion, sacred-secular) by displaying cultural artefacts in self-organized exhibitions, for instance at fundraising events or church gatherings. As such, knowledge produced by religious exhibitions was different from that organized on the academic level — spreading a clear vision of boundaries and identities. Despite these differences, Habermas argued in her third and last point, there were many commonalities between academic and missionary knowledge. Both were marginalized in society — and missionary knowledge was in turn marginalized in academic discourse. This assessment holds particularly true in the field of anthropology — ironically along a distinction introduced by missionaries themselves, namely the one between the sacred (religion) and the secular (science). None of the three aspects discussed in her presentation, Habermas pointed out, have been explored by historians in their entirety, leaving ample room for future researchers to explore.

The third panel took a closer look at the “tools” of missionary knowledge production: maps (Irina Pawlowsky), images (Cécile Fromont), and statistical questionnaires (Justin Reynolds). A close examination of these instruments reveals their ambivalent character, as Fromont demonstrated with regard to engravings decorating the manuscripts of Capuchin friars who traveled west central Africa (today’s Congo and Angola) during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Her “close reading” revealed that these illustrations not only represented European conceptions of the continent but also the interactions between central Africans and the missionaries entering their world and the processes of negotiation and translation resulting from their engagement.

The contributions to panel four, entitled “Co-productions,” presented, first, the results of a scholarly collaboration, namely Manuela Bragagnolo’s and Otto Danwerth’s investigations of norms and mediatic forms employed by the Spanish crown in late sixteenth- and
early seventeenth-century Ibero-American codices (the so-called pragmatici). Secondly, Florence Hsia inquired into the co-production of missionary knowledge and academic sinology in adopting a materialist approach to knowledge artefacts. Interpreting notes, notebooks, letters, or diaries not as texts but as material traces of cultural encounters and exchanges, she demonstrated how Sino-Jesuit book production created a hybrid place of knowledge that combined two traditions: European-style codices and Chinese-style boxed fascicles.

The following presentations of panel five, “Presence and Materialities,” continued the investigation into the material aspect of knowledge production. Chandra Sekhar opened the discussion by giving an overview of his efforts to reconstruct Dalit social history, a topic marred by scarcity of source material, through studying missionary archives and the information their records provide about the everyday life and social practices of Dalit converts. Anne Mariss analyzed how Jesuits employed objects (Christian Catholic as well as Mexican) in their attempts to establish their missions and to implement the Catholic faith in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mexico. More often than not, Mariss argued, the missionaries’ efforts resulted in a complex process of negotiation between indigenous peoples and Europeans. Ana Rita Amaral investigated the role of missionary museums and anthropological collections as training facilities for Catholic missionary personnel in twentieth-century Portugal, more particularly the recruits of the Spiritan Fathers between 1930 and 1960.

Panel six, entitled “Polycentrism and Circulations,” retraced the lines along which missionary knowledge circulated by focusing on two core areas of missionary expertise: linguistic and ethnological knowledge. Federico Palomo demonstrated that linguistic missionary knowledge did not flow in a unidirectional way from the colonial periphery to the metropolitan core but circulated amongst multiple centers of missionary activity, among them cities of the Global South such as Goa or Rio de Janeiro. Regina Sarreiter’s paper explored the practices, discourses and movements linking human and non-human actors in the ethnological collection of German Benedictine missionary Meinulf Küsters.

All papers presented at the conference derived directly from recently concluded or still ongoing research projects. They discussed Catholic and Protestant missionary societies alike. A substantial group among the papers discussed Jesuit missionary work (six out of eighteen presentations), thereby emphasizing the early modern era
in favor of other periods such as the twentieth century. In addition, the overwhelming majority of papers focused on knowledge about non-Europeans produced by missionaries; the exceptions being Olaoluwa’s investigation of processes of cultural translation, and Sekhar’s reconstruction of Dalit social history. Tellingly, both scholars tapped into additional repositories of historical information for their research: They conducted oral history interviews. Clearly, following the paper trail of missionaries and their organizations only carries so far in reconstructing the history of missionary knowledge. Unlocking additional sources beyond missionary archives will thus be imperative for the development of the field. Despite these limitations, the cross-denominational, longue durée perspective on missionary work adopted by the conference conveners offered valuable insights into the nature of missionary knowledge: It was, as many speakers pointed out, instrumental knowledge, gathered to facilitate Christianization. All areas of missionary expertise developed out of necessity and pertained, in addition to linguistic knowledge, to knowledge to influence and regulate the converts’ conduct, his or her body and soul. As such, it was “pastoral knowledge,” to employ a Foucauldian term, which supported colonial governmentality. Secondly, missionary knowledge was also pedagogical and performative knowledge. It was produced not only to expedite conversion but also to instruct future missionaries as well as to educate the general Christian population of the respective motherlands about missionary organizations, their goals, their work in the field, and their successes in order to raise funds and legitimate their work. As a result, missionary knowledge addressed colonizers and colonized alike, introducing and enforcing boundaries, and creating notions of belonging and identity.

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